

THE SILENT RANCHER

GERTRUDE PAGE

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GERRUDE PAGE'S

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A NEW AND IMPROVED
H. K. O. S. A.
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AND THE WILDERNESS
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THE
SILENT
RANCHER

By
CERTRUDE
PAGE

And to the loving Heart that I cried
Asking What I might do to give
Her little children a home in the night
And— A blind man's a dog Heart replied

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THE SILENT RANCHER

I

THE SPIRIT OF THE WATERS

It was May, and the Zambesi was in flood.

In the garden of the Conservator's little bungalow on the north bank, Elaine McNair sat very still and tried not to listen. With thin, nervous, artistic hands, she mended small garments almost in rags, and tried to shut the ears of all her senses.

For she knew that if she listened she would go.

So she sat very still, and stared hard at the poor little ragged garment she was trying, rather helplessly, to mend.

If only the big banana would keep still also!

Her banana, which talked to her in the night with soft, mysterious whisperings; or laughed to her with a rippling laughter in the day; or rocked itself in delirious delight when the winds were boisterous and gay. Elaine loved her banana dearly, but she wished it would regulate its moods a little by the daily exigencies of her trying existence, instead of having a far greater tendency to make confusion worse confounded. Shutting out the sound of the river was, at any rate, possible unless the banana persisted in echoing it to her where she sat. It also made her hear the thunder

of the Falls in the distance by sudden lulls in its rippling mirth, when monotony might have conquered it. It was as though invisible hands played melodies, born of the spirit of the waters, upon the finely-strung harp of her senses; and the power of them was stronger than the power of everyday life. It was like an enchanted music—the mysterious, alluring music of Zambesi Syrens, drawing—drawing her, against her will.

Still she struggled on with the little ragged garment; pricking her fingers, and sewing in a fashion to have made our grandmothers weep.

A lizard and a chameleon, who had just a bowing acquaintance, chanced to meet close by, and for once the chameleon condescended to stop and pass the time of day. He made himself a beautiful green, to mercilessly outclass the green of the lizard, and then he paused a moment to enjoy the effect.

"A nice day," began the lizard diffidently, with his tail, as usual, at "starting-point"—"I wonder how soon she'll go?"

The chameleon bulged himself out to look more imposing; and remarked a trifle frigidly: "I suppose she'll go at the usual time—with the sun."

"Oh, I don't mean the day; I mean the woman," the lizard hastened to explain, while he took a wary glance round from habit, ready to vanish at a moment's notice. It crossed his mind, even as he did so, that it must be rather nice not to have to be always in a hurry. Of course if he could just change to the colour of whatever he happened to be on, or spit violently, or roll his eyes in fearsome anger, whenever danger approached, he would have

time to cultivate a haughty, blue-blooded calm. But when you had to be always twisting your head about, and remembering to keep your tail as a "starting-point," and dare not even think of speed limits, it was impossible not to be a little jump and ambiguous in your speech.

"You have not what I should call lucidity of utterance," remarked the chameleon rather affectedly. "If you meant the woman, why didn't you say so—and why should she go—and where?"

The lizard was so busy glancing round and seeing to his steering gear that he had not time to resent the tone of superiority, and could only, in his usual hurried manner, explain—

"Didn't you know? Haven't you seen? She has the Falls madness upon her. There are certain days when she cannot choose but go—she *must* go—she has the Falls madness! . . . Is that a cat? . . . excuse my abruptness, but really—you know—if it is! . . ."

The chameleon threw his eyes over his shoulder, so to speak, without deigning to move a muscle, though the corners of his mouth curled to a sardonic grin.

"It is not a cat. It is a woolly rabbit belonging to one of the children. I presume you are not afraid of woolly rabbits! . . ."

"Oh no! certainly not—don't speak of it!—I was only a little anxious—it is, as you will quite understand, so inconvenient to lose one's tail. A friend of mine . . ."

"Never mind your friends. They don't interest me. What do you mean by the Falls madness?"

"I mean . . . you are quite sure it is not

a cat? . . . I thought I saw it move . . . and if I lose my tail . . . it is so very inconvenient . . . you quite understand."

"I have told you it is not a cat. I saw one of the children throw it there this morning. I have been on this spot for a week, so I ought to know that rabbit by now. I wish you would not interrupt yourself so."

"I am sorry," meekly—"but my tail . . ."

"I know all about your tail. I want to know about the madness."

"It is the madness that comes when one is too artistic—and there is nothing else. Ever since the woman with the eyes came here, we knew she would get it. We saw her the first night—looking—looking—at the river.

"We saw her the first time she came back, when she had seen the Falls. She was like a moonstruck creature—and her eyes were big—oh! big like saucers with the wonder of it—and her husband got wild with her, and . . .

"Don't tell me any vulgar scandal about her husband. Has he got the madness too? Have they all got it?"

"No—no—only the woman with the eyes. You will see if she looks up. She does not look up because she is afraid—but she is listening all the same, and presently she will go. The banana is enticing her. It is not fair of the banana, but she loves it, and lets it get hold of her. If she looks up and listens, she will forget everything, you will see."

The chameleon pursed up his sardonic lips. "I think you are romancing very foolishly. You have

evidently got the madness yourself—and all because the water falls over a precipice. I have lived here for ages, and I have not got it. I was here when Livingstone came, and he was not mad. They took him to the edge, so that he came upon it suddenly. It took his breath away, I know. It struck him dumb—but it did not make him mad. Why should it make the woman mad?"

"Livingstone was an explorer—not an artist. He was very fond of it all. I have heard my grand mother tell how he would sit silently gazing at the Falls for a long time. But he was obliged to go on. That is just the difference. He was an explorer—so he always had to go on and see what was over the next hill. The woman is an artist, and for an artist there is only the present. And because she is an artist, she must stay. She cannot tear herself away. Because she is an artist, the madness got hold of her. If she lifts her head you will see."

"What is she doing now?—It does not look very artistic."

"She is sewing—because she has a husband. Very often she forgets, and the children go ragged, and then he gets angry—and he—hush!—hush!—she is going to look up . . ."

The banana was silent a moment also—with its long, swaying leaves motionless.

The woman was looking at the river.

It was sweeping past in flood, and as it swept, it was calling—calling—to the artist.

The chameleon watched the woman's eyes. They were large and luminous. Now dark—now hazel—now green—with changing lights and shadows, and long silken lashes, and the far-off

expression of the dreamer. The chameleon was not the first to feel, as he looked at her, that there was nothing else except eyes. Reddish brown hair with a natural wave, small, regular features, a strangely wistful mouth, all passed more or less unnoticed, so insistently did the wonderful eyes dominate her whole being.

And now they were gazing at the sweeping flood, while her bosom heaved, and her lips parted a little, as the rush of the water carried her further and further out of herself—away from the work-a-day world.

How it gurgled and laughed as it hurried by! What exultation it held! Every ripple, every bubble, every twig, seemed mad with exultation, all falling over each other, tripping each other up, hastening—hastening—to where in the distance the exultation became as a bacchanalian riot, when the river took the glorious plunge. Islands stood in its way and tried fruitlessly to break its rush. Graceful ferns leaned down and trailed their delicate fingers, as if they must either stay the torrent or go with it—"Anything—anything," they might be saying with the dreamer, "rather than sit still and take no part." Feathery palms swayed lightly in the breezes where they craned their long necks to see the waters pass. Little rocks lifted small heads and laughed as the river swept noisily by—laughed at the bubbles and the ripples all falling over each other in their haste. From bank to bank—from cataract to cataract—from island to island—only one note, that Song of Exultation forging onwards until it became a Roar of Delight thundering to the stooping heavens, where the water,

in its joy, tossed columns of rainbow-tinted spray far up into the blue. For miles around that earth-born, rainbow-tinted cloud told the watching countryside the exact spot of its heart's darling. Far and wide the distant muffled roar told the listening land of the mad riot of waters—the delirious, joyous plunge—of the presence of a Continent's treasure, unrivalled from pole to pole. At the actual scene itself, grandly, magnificently indifferent to the puny creatures who stood and gazed in awe-struck silence, the mighty glistening cascades of snow-white water swept the precipice face, and thundered their exultation to the world at large.

It was as if they knew their invincible aloofness.

Brush of artist—pen of writer—soul of poet—these strive and strive, and produce perhaps a glimpse here and another there, and occasionally a new aspect; but none ever has, nor ever will, enable the dweller afar off to paint in his mind's eye any true conception of the Wonder itself; nor see any real picture of that turbulent, mad, joyous, frenzied mass of water, hurling itself in a transport of delight into the bottomless chasm, over, and among, and between the rocks of the gigantic precipice.

And no sound, nor picture, nor poem, will give him the true spirit of that exultant roar—that thunder of joy—that ceaseless volume of sound that accompanies the mighty volume of water when it reaches its zenith of achievement, before it merges into the undertone of quiet triumph, as the river sweeps along its narrow gorge to the sea.

It is a Wonder that defies description—defies

cut-and-dried theories—defies the artist and the poet—shouts its unconquerable defiance to all mankind in a *Te Deum* of rejoicing that has its compeers only in mighty waves, and mighty storms, and mighty upheavals.

In its very aloofness it is sublime.

For nearly all other great things there is another only a little less great; or another that, to some minds, disputes the sovereignty of the first.

But when one stands beside the Victoria Falls, one is standing beside a phenomenon that ranks alone—that is beyond comparison; for nowhere else in the world does a mighty volume of water fall over a precipice a mile and a-quarter in length; into a gorge nearly four hundred feet deep, from which the water passes out through an opening only one hundred feet wide.

There are moments for some when it is crushing in its magnitude and invincibility. Ages and ages ago the waters revelled so. Ages and ages ago the shout of exultation rose to the skies. Ages and ages ago all the wonder of it existed even as to-day, sublimely indifferent to any lack of human appreciation, of human eyes, or of human enjoyment.

It was not for mankind that the vast river swept to its plunge, and spread those mighty, glistening cascades over the face of the rock. Empires might come and go—dynasties fall—invaders triumph—but what cared those hurrying, riotous waters, with their enfolding forests?

Whatever happened they frolicked still; it is all a riotous frolic, the sport of a giant river full of a spirit of gaiety when the rains have filled up its

basin, and submerged its shallows, and started it on its yearly revel.

In the little house on the north bank the dreamer understood it all. In her lonely existence its spirit had entered into her spirit—the wonder of it was the joy and the burden of her life. There was no aspect that was not familiar to her, both by night and day; both in the full season and the shallow; when the banks were laden with richest foliage, and when they were dried up and scorched.

At the Falls themselves she knew just where the best rainbows blossomed—just where the silver moonrays produced the loveliest effects—just when and where the lunar rainbows would be visible. She knew the tints of the rising as well as the setting sun, when the earliest rays hastened to spread their delicate hues upon the still rioting waters.

She knew how, in the evening, when one after another the stars came out and looked down on the Wonder, it was sometimes as though a quieter note sounded in the exultation—the note of evening, the hour of restfulness after the long bright day.

But whether it was night or day, evening or morning, it was always as though some mysterious spirit of the waters called to her spirit—called to her in the little bungalow on the north bank, to come out and join the revel. And it was then that she dare not watch the sweeping tide, lest the voice that called, called louder than the daily needs, and lured her away to watch the rioting waters from one of her best loved spots.

For an artist father and a literary mother had between them launched upon a callous, unheeding world a child burdened with the artistic sensitive-

ness of both; and made no attempt to build round her any kind of a shelter from that same non-comprehending world. They had neither made provision for her nor enabled her to make provision for herself; each immersed in his individual art, and oblivious, through thoughtlessness, to the solemn duties of parentage. They called the child by a fancy name, and observed occasionally that she was fair to look at, and then they returned to their art. Finally they both died, and left her alone, with her haunting eyes, and artistic, dreamy nature, and no idea of how to keep herself alive without help. It was then James McNair found her, and married her, enslaved by her childlike simplicity, and those same haunting eyes.

That was an ill day for Elaine. Perhaps it would have been better if she had not been born. Only the river made up for a good deal, now that they had come to the little bungalow on the Zambesi, after her husband was given the appointment of Conservator of the Falls. If only it would be more considerate, and only call to her with its wordless calling when she might safely listen. If only the big banana in the garden would cease echoing that call in her very ears, when she was stooping low over little threadbare garments, and trying to close her sense of sound.

But now the banana swayed, and the river called, and the woman was looking to where, against the blue, rose the feathery white earth-born cloud, with its exquisite rainbow tints.

The chameleon and the lizard were motionless—transfixed by a sense of mystery, of the working

of a spirit beyond their ken. Then the lizard heaved an anxious sigh.

"She is going," he said—"and only two days ago her husband struck her for it. I saw him through the window. She . . . she should not go again—yet."

With a new light creeping into her eyes, the woman went down to the waters' edge.

II

THE SPORT OF THE WATERS

It is generally to be observed that the artistic temperament lives almost solely in the present. The future is a vague, unknown quantity, not worth troubling about. Few artists ever provide against 'a rainy day—ever, indeed, "count the cost."

A desire presents itself, a desire capable of fulfilment if one can but forget the future. At such times it usually happens that the future is forgotten. It was in such a spirit that Elaine stepped into the canoe, and pushed off from the bank. The two baby boys, aged respectively two and four, had gone to have tea with the man at the Power

Station close by; her husband was somewhere in Livingstone; for the time being she was free. For anyone who could use a paddle skilfully, it was not too difficult to take a canoe down the river alone, washing along with the current to the landing-stage near the Falls. Thus, in the first instance, circumstances were entirely propitious to the gratification of this sudden desire to spend an hour in the Rainy Forest with her beloved Falls.

But where her temperament betrayed her was concerning her return. If she thought about it at all, she concluded vaguely there would be boys at the landing-stage who would help her to paddle back against the flood. Anyhow, with true artistic impulsiveness, it was worth risking, and in a very short time she was cleverly steering herself among the currents towards the filmy cloud ahead. The tall palms nodded as she passed, and craned their necks a little further to see the remarkable sight of a woman going down the river alone. The islands lost their air of forming wilful barriers, and seemed to be just motionless in startled surprise. The graceful ferns shook and trembled a little and stayed their sportive dangling in the water. Everywhere were eyes—it was suddenly a world of eyes—watching that frail craft run perilously down with the flood, bearing the woman with the radiant fearless face.

As she drew towards the landing-stage, the spirit of watchful suspense deepened and intensified. Above the note of exultation sounded a note of warning. In the distance it was as though the filmy cloud swayed fitfully, and climbed higher

into the blue to see, across the island-studded flood, what strange sight was causing the watching eyes.

Only the woman herself remained unconcerned, steering her small boat with a masterly hand, while the light grew and grew in her eyes.

Now and then a smile dawned on her face, and broke into a little light laugh. She laughed because the river laughed, and for just that dear, careless hour, she and the river were one. She even spoke to it; addressing the spirit of the waters aloud, as one who would understand. Then again she sang, a quaint little German song her father had always sung beside his easel when he was painting water. Odd how he had seemed always to want water in his landscapes—if possible a river. She remembered the greatest picture he had ever painted had been a swollen river in flood. It was the first picture after his marriage, completed and hung on the line just before she was born.

The recollection made her thoughtful. Had her very earliest beginning perhaps been dominated by a rushing river?

If he had seen the Falls—her Falls—what would he have done, she wondered, in his longing and helpless impotency to reproduce them. She saw him very plainly as she hummed snatches of the quaint little German song he had been so fond of, and she wished he could have been there to share this intoxicating, gliding motion.

Thoughtless and selfish he might have been, but at least he, perhaps more than anyone else, would have understood her passionate absorption and delight. Just to be going thus with the flood at last—unchecked—untrammelled—singing and

laughing and dreaming with the river that sang and laughed and dreamt by night and day. She wished vaguely it might go on for ever, and all the rest be forgetfulness.

But all too soon the landing-stage showed ahead, and it was necessary to steer her course for the bank. She manipulated her paddle skilfully, seeking to turn the nose of the canoe.

It gave a little—a very little—just all that had so far been necessary—but at the same time went steadily forward. She pressed the paddle harder—harder—she strained every nerve—to find suddenly that her old power seemed to have gone from her, and she was making almost no impression at all. But why? A sudden sharp pain shooting through her right arm told her that her left was vainly doing most of the work. And with like suddenness she remembered that when her husband struck her two days ago, she had fallen on her right arm and injured it. The recollection came with sinister meaning. The strength of the man who owned her body and soul seemed to confront her suddenly in her adventure, daring her to disobey him. But there was little enough time to think and remember now; somehow, and at once, the canoe must be steered for the bank.

She stood up and gathered together all her possible strength. The pain in her right arm made it almost useless, but there was still her lithe, muscular body. By leaning on the paddle she could yet, no doubt, turn the head of the canoe. A few moments of breathless suspense followed, and then it began to yield itself and slowly turn inwards. Laboriously and much lashed by the cur-

rent, it crept towards the bank—and then without a second of warning, the paddle snapped in half. The woman, just saving herself from being precipitated into the flood, fell backwards into the canoe.

Before she could reach a second paddle, and regain her position, the boat was in the full fury of the strongest current—sweeping onwards at a fearful pace, to the head of the Falls, and before that terrific rush the paddle in her hands was like a straw in a tempest.

There were a few terrible moments in which she realized her awful position—and then she grew strangely calm. She sat quite still in the bottom of the canoe, and looked straight ahead of her.

All around, where the invisible eyes were still watching, was only horror-struck suspense.

In the eyes of the artist there was a dawning peace.

She had always loved them so—the gay, wonderful, laughing waters—since she came to the little bungalow on the north bank. If they wanted her, if they called now in a manner more real and not to be denied than ever before, she could only go.

On and on swept the canoe, and still her eyes gazed steadily ahead.

At best what had Life to give her? What had it ever given her? What would it ever give her in the future but restless longing and pain?

If the waters wanted her—if Life was about to give her to Death:—well, maybe Death and the waters together would give her the rest and peace and content she had so vainly longed for—would give her the fulfilment of those vague, yearning dreams that haunted her soul by night and day.

Of a truth, it was a glad way to go, if go she must. No decay—no wearing disease—only the Spirit of the Waters calling to her Spirit, and the Joy of the Waters rushing her along to their own glad, glorious plunge—beyond which the river glided peacefully and restfully out to the great sea.

And then suddenly an expression of swift dismay crowded out all else. Quite suddenly she looked round at the receding banks, with their invisible, watching eyes, and tall, craning palms, and something approaching a frenzy crossed her face. A thought like a sword shaft had cut through her half-dulled senses.

“Who would take care of Billy?”

The expression of frenzy drove the dreaminess out of her eyes. She saw the small toddler with his sunny curls and sunny face, and blindly, helplessly, she held out her arms. Jamie, the four-year-old, was his father over again. Whatever happened, he would always look after himself and fare well. Besides, he was his father's favourite. It was rarely indeed, even in his attacks of mad, insensate rage, that he touched Jamie. But Billy he scorned—Billy, who was a baby still, and liked to croon and cuddle, where Jamie preferred to kick and storm.

She snatched a paddle, and once more plunged it in futile, frantic efforts into the water—“O God in heaven—who would take care of Billy? . . .”

But now even the river mocked her. Even her river, whose spirit had crept into her spirit, only hissed and gurgled as it carried her helplessly on—on—

What cared the river for Billy—or the islands

that refused to bar her fatal progress—or the banks to which she turned her eyes in vain imploring?

On—on swept the waters, now sportively mocking, carrying the frail canoe, and heading in a straight line for the massive waterfall, between Livingstone and Cataract Islands.

And once again her very helplessness calmed her. Once more the horror and the hopelessness numbed her senses. It was useless to cry out, and useless to struggle—had it not been so nearly all her life?

Once more the wide, wonderful eyes rested quietly on the filmy cloud ahead, and Elaine McNair waited undismayed for the moment that should carry her into Eternity.

III

GOVERNMENT HOUSE

THEY had just finished tea at Government House when the tidings came through to Livingstone on the private telephone from the "Victoria Falls Hotel."

While the frail skiff with its human freight was

rushing headlong to destruction the silence of the afternoon siesta had held its usual sway over the long, cool corridors, and on the wide, deep verandah, with its trellis-work gay with Rhodesia's wonderful flowering creepers. Silent natives, in long white kansas and small, exquisitely embroidered white caps, moved soundlessly about, until they too retired for the noonday rest. Only the continuous buzzing of myriad insects, in whose world was too much competition to allow of siestas by day, broke the absolute soundlessness of that midday heat. Then at four o'clock came the usual return to life. Once more the silent, white robed natives moved among the chairs and tables, only now, in place of black embroidered zouaves, they wore festive scarlet, embroidered in gold. In the little square of shade below the verandah, where rather more air managed to circulate with quick, deft movements they arranged a dainty tea-table, in the midst of large, inviting, scarlet lined wicker chairs, still awaiting those tardy sleepers, who had not yet aroused.

Then, presently, down the verandah steps, with languid, graceful movements, came a woman, and seated herself at the head of the table with its gleaming silver. And what had been mere shade before seemed to become coolness, for looking at Gwendolen Leven, in her charming muslin frock and with her exquisite rose-leaf tints, it was impossible to believe that the thermometer stood at 90° in the shade. Just as some people seem to effuse an atmosphere of heat, and steam, and flurry, so Gwendolen's very presence suggested cool, calm, shady restfulness. Scarcely had she seated herself.

however, when a quick step along the verandah caused her to glance upward with a half-smile, and remark—

“What’s the matter, Hippo? Is it really worth such a stampede as that, with the temperature at ninety in the shade?”

“Matter! . . .” snorted the newcomer. “Stampede! . . . Why, you’d tear your hair out by the roots, if you were hustled and bustled as I’ve been, all this blessed day.”

“Did H. H. get out of bed the wrong side this morning? I thought he had by the way he ate his breakfast.”

“I don’t know anything about his bed or his breakfast. I only feel as if . . . as if . . .”

“As if you must stamp, eh? Well, now you’ve found time to stamp the whole length of the verandah, shaking its pillars to their foundations, and the house to its corner-stones. sit down calmly in the chair that looks the most comfortable, compose yourself to the befitting dignity of the Private Secretary of His Honour the Administrator, and I will make you a delicious cup of tea.”

“Heaven shower blessings on your head!” in a grateful murmur, and the private secretary sank into one of the large wicker chairs.

“Thank you,” his companion replied lightly, as she busied herself with the teapot; “but the kind of blessings Heaven usually showers upon unoffending mortals do not, as a rule, appeal to my particular temperament. I think we’ll let well alone, and take things as they come.”

The secretary, who was designated Elmsley on days when the administrative temperament was at

cloudy and stormy, and Hippo when it was at set fair, looked up smilingly at the charming apparition engaged over his cup of tea.

"How you love to make yourself out a sinner—or should it be a sinneress? I really believe if I called you Jezebel you would take it as a compliment."

"I'm not very sure who Jezebel was? Did she drive furiously, or get thrown out of the window three times?"

"She is generally, I believe, suppose to stand for the synonym of all that is bad. . . ."

"Ah well! I expect she wasn't dull, anyway!

. Here comes H. H. If they haven't yet prepared his own special brew of tea
Heaven help us!"

Reginald Cardington, the youthful Administrator of N.W. Rhodesia, paused for a second on the top step of the verandah and glanced down at the graceful woman presiding over the tea table, before he descended. The secretary rose to his feet and waited. It was still a matter of conjecture whether the barometer registered stormy or fair.

The Administrator came down the steps. "By the way, Hippo!" he said, "just have the supports of the verandah looked at after tea. They are not guaranteed against any sort of a stampede, you know."

The Hippo smiled his sunniest smile. At any rate the barometer was veering round to fair. Gwendolen Leven did not for a moment look up. She was cutting bread and jam for the Hippo, and getting somewhat sticky

"My affection for you would rise almost to adoration, Hippo," she remarked, "if you did not

persist in eating bread and jam. I protest against the habit as being plebeian, and childish, and unpatriotic. Whoever dreams of gorging on bread and jam at afternoon tea in England? I am in hourly dread that the habit will spread to Wauyard. But I shall put my foot down. I will not be burdened with a husband who gorges himself on bread and jam."

"Has my tea come yet?" asked the Administrator, sinking into one of the large, inviting chairs.

"It will be here in a second. We besought Heaven to send it speedily, when we heard your step approaching. We said, 'It is His Honour, and on this day of days, His Honour brooketh no delay.' Does His Honour intend to sticky himself with jam, or maintain his dignity on cake?"

Reginald Cardington smiled a little wearily, but even in weariness his smile was of rare sweetness.

"His Honour intends to maintain his dignity, sticky or unsticky, on bread and jam."

"Et tu, Brute!" with a shrug of her shoulders. "Was it indeed for this I left my native land and braved the horrors of the wilderness, just to cut bread and jam for the mighty?"

"You do it so charmingly," put in the Hippo. "You've no idea how it shows off your hands—or perhaps you have? . . ." with a little laugh.

"I'll lay you ten to one on it, Hippo," from the Administrator. "It's because I know she likes cutting it I risk indigestion and ask for it."

• He was still leaning back with a worn, exhausted air, but the worried lines were smoothing themselves out a little, and the smile still lingered. Rumour credited Reginald Cardington with a

forbidding manner and the ways of a despot; but however this might be, it was undeniable that he could be extraordinarily attractive if he liked.

It also credited him as being impatient with, and bored by, women; and yet he was never so happy as when some woman he liked was at his beck and call, to amuse and rest him and pervade his home with the indescribable atmosphere of delicate scent, light footsteps, rippling laughter, and a flutter of petticoats.

That was why Gwendolen Leven presided at the tea table in the Government House garden, and gave orders to the attendant natives, as if it were her right. As a matter of fact, she had no more right than any other visitor would have had. She merely happened to be the particular representative of feminine charms who, by a fortunate chance for Reginald Cardington, was procurable in his far-off home.

Six months ago, when Wynyard Leven, the new Secretary to the Administration, had arrived from England, he had somewhat astonished Livingstone in two particulars. One was his youth and his extraordinary charm, the other was his beautiful and clever wife. In that arid desert of heat and sand, as it seemed to most of its residents, they were like two beings from another planet; not only because of their charm—there were charming people there before—but because of an indefinable something, that pronounced them alien. It was evident in half a day they were not of those who usually dwelt in places of heat and sand. Neither were his ways the ways of an official in the Civil Service nor hers those of a comparatively poor

official's wife. Allusions to such functions as the Derby, and Ascot and Newmarket brought the half-veiled criticism of a connoisseur and frequenter: and one day out of a music portfolio slipped a beautiful panel portrait of Gwendolen Leven in Court attire. It presently transpired that she had attended Court, not once, but many times: while both had visited at houses where Royalty was entertained—and curiosity grew rampant.

Then came the sequel. A chance paragraph in a Society paper announced the fact that Mrs. Wynyard Leven, the divorced wife of Colonel St. Maur, had married the co-respondent in the divorce case, a captain in the Guards, and gone with him to Livingstone, Rhodesia, where he had obtained the post of Secretary to the Administration. The paragraph further gave a scantily-veiled allusion to the power of influence, and a short account of the brilliant social surroundings the bride had forfeited, concluding with the information that the damages exacted from the co-respondent had left his finances in a somewhat precarious condition.

Reginald Cardington only made one allusion to the information thus obtained, but that was a sufficiently characteristic one. The evening the news was out, and Wynyard Leven was a little defiantly meeting a new expression in the eyes about him, the Administrator asked him with laconic bluntness and a dry touch of humour—"Have you paid up?"

• Later, when an unlooked-for advent of married officials made housing extremely difficult, he suggested to Captain Leven, as his work was carried on entirely in one of the offices at Government

House. They might as well move there for a time, while more houses were built; couching his invitation, laconic as ever, in terms that yet left no doubt as to its genuineness. The afternoon when the Hippo shook the verandah posts to their foundations, and the frail skiff washed onward with its human burden, they had been resident for two months; and the arrangement had proved one that no one regretted, nor wished to change.

While Gwendolen was still at her bread-and-jam-cutting task, another step sounded along the verandah, a step that combined the lightness of the athlete with the steady regularity of the soldier, and yet a third remarkable for his youthfulness appeared. Wynyard Leven ran lightly down the steps and joined the party at the tea-table. Before seating himself, however, he gave a piece of information to the Administrator, that caused a sudden look of gravity on the tired face, and then there was a moment's silence.

"I'll see about it later," he said. "Mrs. Leven is particularly anxious that you should lose no time in regaling yourself on bread and jam. She is stuffing the Hippo and me, simply because she delights to show off her hands in the occupation."

Wynyard smiled at his wife, and sat down beside her. Gwendolen raised her fine dark eyes to his face, with an expression of stony severity.

"Wynyard Leven—once for all, you shall not eat school-boy fare in my presence. I absolutely forbid it. Did you, or did you not, promise to love, honor, and obey me? . . ."

"I don't know, but it probably made little difference. I have found it equally impossible to

escape any of the three," was his gallant reply. Then he drew out a fine silk handkerchief, and dried his face, which made his wife exclaim--

"Really, Wyn, you ought 'to go about with a towel to dry yourself, like the rickshaw boys at Durban."

The Hippo, looking much amused, replied wickedly, "I wish we could emulate them in other ways also. In this temperature no one ought to be expected to wear clothes."

"Never mind, Hippo," put in the Administrator. "by and by you shall have a beautiful Hippodrome built expressly for you at the end of the garden, with a big swimming-bath, and there you and the little Hippos can disport yourselves minus clothing, until further notice, before the admiring gaze of crowds of natives." He laughed gaily.

They chatted on lightly, a pleasing, interesting group, in which each member carried a certain distinction of his own:—the youthful private secretary, with the gaiety and charm and gallantry of the best type of English public school boy; the venturesome Administrator, with his pale, resolute, attractive, baffling face; the young Guardsman with his perfect profile, his winning smile, his manliness and boyishness so delightfully blended; lastly the woman, with that subtle, mysterious indefinable attraction which no words seem able to convey; in which beauty is but an ingredient; and which, for want of a better expression, we comprehensively term personality. To describe Gwendolen Leven in so many words would merely make a sort of framework for the actual picture. She herself, with her subtle lights and shades and

mysteries and surprises. would still be needed to complete the presentment. The ordinary adjectives would fail to do other than supply the outline. Intrinsically and bafflingly she was not any of these things alone—she was Gwendolen Ieven.

And it was entirely characteristic of her. when, a little later the tea and the light banter ended she suddenly punctuated a conversation between her husband and the Administrator, to which she had appeared supremely indifferent, with the ambiguous remark—"I'd sooner have a strong man who drank, than a weak one who didn't."

"Which presumably means that you have a special weakness for drunkards," said the Administrator

"Not at all. You are judging this man, Arthur Berridge, from the fact that he is given to drinking more than is good for him. I say that is only a phase. It does not follow that in most other things he is not a hero."

"You can hardly claim strength for him, though," drily.

"Oh yes. I can—should occasion arise."

"And if occasion should not arise, we are presumably to overlook his continual lapses. because, under certain conditions, given certain opportunities, he might be able to prove himself something other than a man addicted to drink."

Gwendolen was not in the least abashed.

"That is not what I said at all. I merely assert that because this man drinks, it does not follow he has no sterling qualities fine enough to counter-balance the other. Instead of damning him comprehensively because of one weakness, make sure

first about his strength, and balance one against the other."

"If he had any genuine strength would he continue to ignore the warnings he has repeatedly received, that each time must be the last?"

"I do not know. Possibly there are many instances in between when his strength did not fail him. Anyhow, he is not an habitual drunkard."

"Certainly not," put in Wynward Leven. "At heart he is a thundering good fellow."

The Administrator got up with an impetuous movement. "I have no patience with men who make fools of themselves under any circumstances," was his unrelenting verdict. "Will you come and see the coffee plantation, Mrs. Leven?"

"If you will promise not to be snappish," was the cool response, as Gwendolen rose.

They strolled down past the tennis-court, and along the railway line, and as they went, the quiet communicativeness of the Administrator showed more plainly than anything else could have done, in what high esteem he held his companion. Moreover, he spoke as if he invited her comments and opinion.

"I have had some news from the north," he was telling her. "General Mahon is to be married very shortly."

Gwendolen raised her eyebrows and remarked with satire, "Then the good lady who had the courage to get engaged to him really means to go on to the bitter end! It is to be hoped she is of the dragon type, entirely capable of holding her own, and somewhat dense concerning snobbishness. She should also be at least forty-five."

‘ She is twenty-five, I believe.’

“ And? . . .” with an expressive gesture.

“ A somewhat unsophisticated but exceedingly charming and good-looking young woman. I happen to know some great friends of her family.”

“ Then what in the world? . . .” significantly.

For a moment Reginald Cardington’s expression was not entirely pleasant. His lips curled, and he shrugged his shoulders slightly, as he replied, “ General Sir Henry Mahon, K.C.B., is Administrator of North-Eastern Rhodesia, but has no family distinction. The future Lady Mahon is the daughter of a poor but exceedingly well connected clergyman. Each can therefore give the other something lacking, and no doubt much desired.”

“ Yes—that’s all very well; but if she is both good-looking and charming need she buy at such a price as that?”

“ My dear Mrs. Leven, men in England are very scarce just now, and K.C.B.’s still scarcer; and poor clergymen’s daughters, even good-looking and well-connected, are very plentiful. The chief point of interest for us is that she is sailing very soon, and—well—there is rumour of trouble with the natives near Fife. It may come to nothing, or it may prove serious. If it were the latter, Mahon could scarcely arrive here to fetch his bride for three months.”

“ And in that case?”

“ In that case, if she has already left England, we must offer her hospitality indefinitely.”

“ And you, and Wynvard, and the Hippo will all fall in love with her, I suppose!” with a smile.

The Administrator smiled too. “ It would be

rather amusing to cut Mahon out." He said and at that moment, white and breathless, the Indians hurried up to them.

"They have just rung up from the 'Falls Hotel,' sir, to say a canoe, with a woman in it, has washed down to the Falls, and is wedged on the extreme edge."*

"Good God! . . ." involuntarily.

"They think it is Mrs. McNair from the Bungalow, but had not time to make sure. No one seems to know what to do, and the canoe may go over any second. . . ."

"How awful! . . ." Gwendolen was white and horror-struck.

"We must go at once," from the Administrator.
"Though Heaven only knows! . . ."

"Yes—yes—come along! . . ." and with horror in their faces, they hastened back to the house, and started at once for the river.

AUTHOR'S NOTE—This incident is founded on the fact that a canoe, which broke away from its moorings, washed down to the head of the Falls, and there remained, wedged as described, until the water subsided and it could be safely recovered.

IV

THE RESCUE

"SOMEONE has gone on an engine that happened to be at the station," the secretary told them, as they commenced to trolley recklessly down the new trolley line, laid through the sand to the boat-house and landing-stage.

"They say it was Berridge. He collared the engine-driver, and shoved him on the engine, and promised him five pounds if he went full speed, and a broken head if he didn't. He would get there in about fifteen minutes after the message came, as he commandeered Dr. Wood's horse and literally flew to the station."

"God only knows what he can do," muttered Wynyard Leven, who had joined them. "There isn't even a rocket apparatus here."

The Administrator was staring straight ahead with a fixed look of unusual gravity, and offered no solution.

"I hope it was Mr. Berridge," remarked Gwendolen.

"Why?" the Hippo asked.

She was silent a moment. "Because it would be his chance," was the slightly ambiguous answer; and then they trolleyed furiously on in silence.

In the meantime a condition of affairs bordering on pandemonium reigned among the few visitors and the employees at the "Falls Hotel." In a con-

fused mass they gathered on the bank nearest the fatal spot, and gazed helplessly at the canoe, wedged for the time being between two pieces of rock which showed above the water line. Fortunately it was in a straight line with the current. Had it been sideways it must assuredly have broken up quickly. Also it had shipped a good deal of water, and was therefore less easily lifted by the rushing stream. In the water, sitting up and holding tightly to the sides, was Elaine McNair. Now and then she turned her head and looked at the helpless figures watching her from the bank, but for the most part she gazed straight ahead, with a dazed, rigid expression.

No one at present had been able to offer any suggestion beyond the futile, hysterical imploring of the women and the less evenly balanced men. It truly seemed that only Divine Agency and a miracle could save the white-faced woman, who might go to her death any second before their eyes.

Then a wild screeching was heard through the trees on the north bank, and an engine dashed over the bridge, and pulled up at the nearest spot to the waiting, horror-stricken spectators. A man sprang off the engine, and ran towards the group, scattering them unceremoniously to right and left as he forged through to the best vantage-ground. Then he stood quite still a moment, and took in, with keen, experienced, resolute eyes the exact position of the canoe, and all its surroundings. No one spoke. The man's whole attitude and expression commanded silence, and at the same time created a gleam of hope.

Suddenly he raised his hands to his lips, and

above, the roar of the waters—that exultant roar that now sounded as the pitiless, angry revelling of devils—was the sound of a great shout. The woman in the canoe slowly turned her head and looked at the shouter.

“I am coming . . .” he called again, and though she could not possibly have distinguished the words, it was visible that something of a light crossed the dazed expression of her face.

“You cannot go! . . .” broke from the group—and such expressions as—“Why lose two lives instead of one? . . . The man must be mad! . . . No one can possibly reach her! . . .”

But he only brushed them aside, still with that stern, resolute face, while he looked among them for a kindred spirit. “Who is going to help me?” he asked sharply, and in reply came only the questions—“What are you going to do?” and “It is only madness to attempt a rescue! . . .”

Without waiting for anything further, Arthur Berridge, for he it was, commenced giving directions to those most likely to heed calmly. The strongest and longest rope procurable he asked for, to be brought quickly to the landing-stage; and volunteers to help him take a canoe to Livingstone Island, or as near as they could get. Then he hastened along the bank to the spot from whence he must start on his dangerous enterprise. Some of the group hurried along with him, while others remained in sight of the canoe. At the landing-stage there was delay before the rope came, and in the interval, full speed down the river came the Government House party. The Administrator landed first, and at once commenced hurried in-

quiries. Wynyard Leven made straight for Berridge.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to save her, if this cursed rope comes in time," came between clenched teeth.

"How?"

Berridge briefly explained his plans, finishing bitterly—"I have asked for helpers, and no one has volunteered."

Wynyard Leven looked straight back into the resolute eyes.

"I will come."

"You! . . ." The voice came sharp and horror-struck, and both men turned quickly to Gwendolen, who had been standing silently by.

There was a breathless pause, and then Berridge spoke. "Someone else will."

The husband and wife stood and looked at each other. The woman's face was deathly white, and her pupils dilated strangely, but no tremor shook her frame. Yet in one flash her whole attitude seemed to convey to the man for whom she had given up so much why he, of all people, should not risk leaving her to face the consequences alone. At last the man spoke. "Gwennie," he said, in a voice that contained both submission and a plea, "it is a woman."

Gwendolen's eyes sought the hurrying mocking river.

"Go!" she said simply.

"Bless you!" he murmured huskily, and turned to where Berridge was already making ready his canoe. Then the Hippo joined them. "I, too," he said, and almost instantaneously two natives

stepped forward, spurred by the white men's valour, and offered to guide. So the four took the paddles, the two river boys at the back to steer, Leven and Elmsley in front, and Berridge saving his strength for the strain that lay ahead of him.

As they pushed off a cheer rose from the watching group—a cheer of deepest feeling—but Gwendolen, with the Administrator beside her, looked silently ahead, as one who neither saw nor heard what was going forward. Then, as the canoe took the dangerous current, rushing along to the head of the Falls, everyone moved back along the bank to the first vantage-ground. Gwendolen turned her face with the rest, but when she saw the position of the canoe, and the silent figure awaiting her doom, some of her fortitude left her. She moved aside, and sat down where she could see neither boat nor river.

Meanwhile, in danger every second of being carried away headlong by the stream, the brave rescuers grimly stuck to their task.

And now the river was only cruel. It laughed and bubbled, and exulted; but no longer in joyous glee; rather over its own power, its own heartlessness, its own dread work. The spirit of cruelty seemed to communicate itself all round. The very palms tossed defiantly, the bananas rocked with delight, and round the half-submerged rocks the waters hissed and bubbled a callous crying of what they had done.

"You think you can save her!" cried the river jeeringly, and buffeted the frail canoe, driving it hither and thither.

Again and again it seemed as if they must wash helplessly to destruction, but still the paddles were

firmly grasped, and there was no shadow of turning in the resolute faces of the paddlers. Then amid a breathless hush, followed by a bursting sense of relief, the canoe was seen to turn slowly inward and fight its way to the edge of an island in a direct line with the wedged canoe. A few moments later all five occupants had clambered ashore, and the awful tension was momentarily relieved.

But what next?

Breathlessly, amid incredulous murmuring, the spectators now saw the man who had hitherto sat quietly while the others fought and strained, commence to strip as for a plunge.

'Good God! . . . he's going in,' muttered the Administrator; and, stirred unendurably Gwendolen stood up.

'Who? . . . ' was the only word her rigid lips could frame.

'Beiridge,' hastily—and she turned her eyes gratefully to the group across the rushing water.

'He is *magnificent*,' she said, and breathed a little heavily with relief and suspense mingled.

'The arc tying the rope round him? . . . ' she added, inquiringly.

'Yes, evidently he is going to swim down to the canoe'—and then in muttered undertones—'It is superb—superb! . . . '

'It is his chance!' Gwendolen half whispered, and they watched in silence, while the man, whom, a few hours before, one of them had condemned irremediably as a drunkard, took his life in his hands and slid down into the foaming waters. A few powerful strokes carried him out into the current, and then he was seen to let himself go, and

while the rope was gradually slackened, he drifted down straight on to the wedged canoe.

Then it was that the tension seemed to become unbearable. Tears flowed freely and unheeded—strong men let go their manhood and choked down sobs from very weakness; women clung to trees for support and spoke wild, incoherent words unconsciously. Two people were white to the lips in dumb rigidity—the Administrator and Gwen-dolen. Amid a silence that was sound, and a sound that was silence—amid a very breathlessness in the rush and roar of the river itself, an air of waiting suspense in the filmy, foam-white cloud of spray, a tremulous, listening note in the gleaming, mighty cascades—they saw the swimmer grasp the canoe on the edge of the chasm of death and slowly—slowly—clamber into it. They saw him take the woman's hands in his, while it was as if she only watched him with dazed, non-comprehending eyes; and they knew that he was calling her back as from some far land. Never, perhaps, more significantly had Life and Death stood together on the extreme edge of eternity—he with the rope around him that might mean life for both; she with the spirit-light already in her eyes, and the dread chasm before her that could only mean death.

On the bank even breathing seemed stilled. It was one of those supreme moments when Silence alone could express the inexpressible.

Then while they watched—while the world around watched—they saw the man fix the rope to the canoe, without releasing it from his own shoulders, and then give the signal to the four waiting figures on the island.

The tension grew to actual pain. Moment after moment passed, and it was seen that no impression whatever was made. Would they go over yet? . . . the brave rescuer and the woman he had come to save. . . . Evidently they had underrated the force of the current, and the strength of the four men was useless against such a tide.

What was to be done?

Eyes looked questioningly into eyes, and useless solutions died unspoken on white lips.

Then a shout arose. Every face turned eagerly up the river, and an answering shout rang out burstingly, as a second canoe, manned by two white men and four stalwart river boys, was seen coming down on the current.

Inspired by the bravery of their comrades and the three other white men, a call for volunteers by a much-liked Native Commissioner and doctor had been instantly responded to by hesitating natives. So in the nick of time, while the canoe on the brink of the precipice was already seen to be endangered by futile efforts which had but lessened its security, six more pairs of strong arms added their weight, and slowly—amid that suspense that was actual pain—the frail craft moved away from its awful position. On—on—it was drawn, every second increasing its distance from the merciless chasm, though at the same time, perhaps, weakening its powers of resistance. Another five minutes would surely see it in safety. But no! . . . what was this? . . . the man hastily standing up and seizing the woman. God in Heaven!—surely it was not the rope breaking! Another agonizing pause, and the watchers saw the man slip into the

river, holding fast to the woman, while the canoe which had been slowly filling from a leak torn by the jagged edges of submerged rocks, struck a hidden stump and turned over.

For one dreadful minute nothing could be seen of the two humans, and then, secured by a second rope, the doctor plunged in to help.

A little later, amid a burst of hysterical shouting, two exhausted men bore an unconscious woman to the bank, and eager hands and arms reached down to grasp them.

V

GWENDOLEN HAS AN OBJECT

LIVINGSTONE was itself again. In a township whose two chief constituents may be said to be heat and sand, even a tragedy, averted at the last moment into a thrilling rescue, can only keep popular interest at fever heat for a few days. Then conversation gradually reverts into its old channels. Who came in by the northern train on Friday, and who went out by it on Saturday? What celebrity, if any, is at the "Falls Hotel"? What did Mrs. A. say because the Government House carriage

fetched her to the Government House "at home" before Mrs. B., whose husband is a degree higher in the Civil Service? At the Administrator's estate, in the shade of the verandah, where Gwendolen Leven presided over a little court of lonely, admiring males a day or two later, the conversation was even frivolous. The two doctors were there, and the Native Commissioner, besides the Hippo, His Honour, and the miscreant-hero, Arthur Berridge. And one and all insisted upon eating bread and jam cut specially by their hostess.

After tea a move was made to the tennis-court, and while four of the men commenced to play a set, the Administrator strolled off to look at his flowers and shrubs. He glanced at Gwendolen as if expecting her to join him, but she purposely ignored the look, and contrived instead to get into conversation with Arthur Berridge, who was standing with a slightly defiant expression, watching the game. He was a striking-looking man, with that physically hard look that almost always denotes the Englishman, and is so attractive. One could almost see his muscles and his toughness, dominated by a pair of clear, piercing blue eyes, that would have scorned to look sideways, a square jaw that suggested cast iron, and a skin of rich, clear bronze. If, as was commonly said, he was given to self-indulgence in more ways than one, it was equally certain he contrived to counteract any ill effects by taking a great deal of hard exercise in the open air. Gwendolen liked him. She always had done, though he had shown less susceptibility than perhaps any of the others to her charms.

Of a truth, he was not a drawing-room man, and

it was generally recognized that whatever interest he took in the opposite sex did not, apparently, extend beyond that portion sometimes known as the unsexed.

Yet at imminent, frightful risk to himself, he had gloriously saved Elaine McNair. And afterwards, just as one would expect who had observed him at all, he shrank from all admiration and praise, and was, almost rude in his brusqueness to those who insisted.

"I am the strongest swimmer in the country, probably," he said, in a certain quick, dry way of his, "so it was a fortunate thing I happened to be there."

"And what if a crocodile had caught you; it was a very likely spot for them?" asked someone.

"A crocodile did not catch me," was the laconic reply. "When it does, I'll tell you afterwards what happened."

Something was said in his hearing about the Royal Humane Society's medal. "I want no medal," he asserted, "nothing would induce me to receive it before a lot of gaping, grinning people."

"He must have something," Gwendolen had said, when the remark was repeated to her. "and you must give it to him in your office, H. H. You must do this to show you can appreciate his splendid courage, as well as deprecate his besetting sin."

"I'll give him a handsome cellarette if you like," was the dry response, "and drink his health in neat whisky to show there is no ill-feeling."

But now as Gwendolen approached to where he was standing, with an artless little air of mere coincidence, a close observer would have seen a

slightly irritable expression cross his face. It suggested that neither Government House nor its occupants had much attraction for him, and he was only there because he had to be. Gwendolen had little difficulty in divining this from what she had heard of his unsocial ways, and she liked him none the less for it. She knew that he usually spent his afternoons, after office hours, in rowing on the Zambesi, or at golf; and that on Saturdays he rode long distances late into the night, that he might shoot on Sunday.

She knew that every man in the place liked him, and the women seemed scarcely to know him; and the Administrator had always been rather down on him.

And knowing these things, she was far too wise to approach him in a conventional manner, and attack him, so to speak, with conventional phrase; while at the same time bent on conquest.

"I have come to the conclusion, that a very apt description of Livingstone, is a *compote* of heat and sand, washed down by the Zambesi," was her opening sentence. "All this sort of thing"—comprehensively including the tennis-players and the amateur gardener—"is fluff. What do you think?"

A gleam of amusement crossed his eyes.

"I think," he replied, without any self consciousness, "that a little whisky mixed with the Zambesi helps to swallow the heat and sand."

Gwendolen looked amused also. "I think we may claim mutually to have originated the most apt description of Livingstone yet formulated, though I hardly think it will be admitted into guide books. Ever since I came I have said that without

the Zambesi it would be unendurable. We should simply lie like dead flies on a sand heap—done to death by unmitigated boredom. Tennis and gardening and golf are mere fluff. It is the Zambesi that keeps us going. I love it."

"And I . . ." He hesitated a moment. "May I get you a chair?"

"Thank you."

They leaned back comfortably in two of the big scarlet lined wicker chairs. Berridge pushed his Terai hat unceremoniously on to the back of his head, and Gwendolen knew she had won. When he stood thus half defiantly gazing at the tennis-players, she guessed he had been turning over in his mind how he could excuse himself, and retreat to the river. When he pushed his hat back like that, she knew he would leave the excuse alone, and remain.

For a few minutes she watched him covertly, not quite sure whether to dive straightway into the subject uppermost in her mind, or whether to lead up to it diplomatically. And as she did so, she was struck again by the strength and the suggestion of veiled defiance in his face. It was the first time she had had an opportunity of studying him closely, and she marvelled a little at some of the things she had heard. Perhaps his short, abrupt manner of speech made him enemies, or misled those who had but a superficial acquaintance.

To her woman's instinct nothing could belie the underlying strength, which it seemed to her was the trait that mattered most in a man; and she was glad to remember that her husband had always spoken of him admiringly. It renewed that quiet

faith of hers in the handsome, boyish-looking man she had dared so much for.

So they sat on for a few minutes in silence—he silent because “small talk” was a commodity of which he was entirely deficient, she from a certain curiosity to see what he would do.

Then she decided to plunge.

“I wanted you to come to-day to tell me about Mrs. McNair. Has she quite recovered her dreadful experience?”

She noticed that his whole face seemed to contract. The lips tightened, the eyes narrowed, and a perpendicular crease in his forehead deepened.

“Yes, she has quite recovered,” and he spoke a little shortly.

“It must be very lonely for her down there. She never comes up to Livingstone at all, does she?”

“No. I think not.”

“Has she no friends?” refusing to be repulsed.

“None.”

“Except her rescuer!” with a charming smile. He was silent.

“Supposing I were to go and see her?” questioningly.

He was thoughtful a few moments, and then said :

“It would be nice of you.”

“She would be pleased to see me?”

“She would be rather too frightened to show it, probably, but all the same it would be nice of you to go.”

“Do you mean frightened or shy?”

“Both.”

“But why should she be frightened?”

"She is not accustomed to visitors," a little anxiously.

"Do you go often?" she could not resist asking.

"I am fond of the children; and then I am on the river a great deal. I have known her husband a long time. I knew him before he married."

He did not tell her that when he heard James McNair was married, he had exclaimed, "God help his wife!"—Lor give her any hint of the shock he had experienced when he first looked into the big, haunting eyes of the youthful, frail-looking wife. He merely added, "McNair is very Scotch and very reserved. He does not encourage visitors, as he thinks if she has her children and her house it is enough."

Gwendolen's keen divination told her there was something left unsaid, some mystery lying behind, and she determined at once to make an early opportunity to pay her visit. Not from any vulgar curiosity—nothing could have been more foreign to her nature; but because, for reasons best known to herself, she had a vast sense of tenderness towards any woman who might be unhappily married. Her companion seemed to understand something of this, for he looked at her a moment with gratitude in his eyes, and a friendly expression in place of the defiance. And it was entirely typical of him that for the first time he noticed how beautiful her face was; and that indefinable atmosphere of one in some way apart from other women—someone who moved in a world of her own.

When he rose to stand aside, as the Administrator approached, he was conscious that in some vague way he was glad for Elaine McNair.

Reginald Cardington had come up with a telegram in his hand, and he took the empty chair beside Gwendolen.

"News," he remarked, "from the north."

"Yes! . . ."

"Trouble has broken out among the natives on the border, and Mahon has had to start off in a hurry. He is likely to be away about three months."

"And Miss Harcourt?"

"Miss Harcourt sailed from England on the twentieth in the *Kinfauns Castle*. She will reach Cape Town in two weeks. Mahon asks if she may stay here until he can fetch her, or make arrangements for an escort to take his place."

Gwendolen glanced away with a little laugh. "I think we had better get her a substitute for a husband also. All is fair in love and war, H. H., and Government House wants a mistress. Do you hear this, Wyn?" as her husband approached. "General Mahon has had to go to the border and Miss Harcourt is to await a fresh escort here. I have already married her off-hand to our Administrator instead."

VI

FOR'ARD AND AFT

It was like Evelyn Harcourt to stand alone in the forepart of the big Union-Castle liner, as it steamed away from Southampton, instead of mingling with the group behind, still waving adieux to their friends ashore. For she was of those who keep their gaze for the most part fearlessly on the future, and the great possibilities it may hold, with a, sometimes, almost sublime indifference to the small things of the present. She was also very young.

So young, that those who had travelled some distance on the road to the ever-retreating future and knew what must inevitably lie around her feet, however fearlessly high she held her head and kept her gaze, could not have foreborne a secret thought of pity. The eyes, though unfailingly clear and steady, were so vaguely full of glorious anticipation, of young enthusiasm, and of splendid intentions. The very way she walked, the very way she carried herself, the very directness of her gaze to the horizon, bespoke the nobleness of heart that was ready to do and dare all things, for the sake of her own lofty ideals. And she was only twenty-five. The wayfarers who could look back could not choose but see that much disillusionment, much

disappointment, much heart-breaking comparison between the real as it is, opposed to the ideal as we would have it, would necessarily trace fine lines on the smooth forehead. and cast fleeting shadows in the clear eyes, before she could by any possibility attain to that lofty future her eager dreams were ever picturing.

For the road to true and lasting success or greatness is the road of failure, and disappointment and sorrow. The heart that looks ever to future events, and dreams of future achievements. has not time to stay and pick out the smooth places. and walk round the stony ones, on the road of life; it must needs go straight on—on—perhaps even through mud, to the far-off voices that call.

But now the big steamer drops down the tide and "away aft" on the first-class deck, misty eyes look back at the loved receding shores, and wrung hearts suffer the last torturing pang, as they think how long it may be before they see those enduring cliffs again; or perchance a pair of watching, loving eyes, dearer even than home or country, who see with anguish the tall red funnels disappearing in the distance.

"Away for'ard," however, there is emptiness, except at the two extreme corners of the deck, where, like two sentinel outposts of the future, are a man and a woman. The woman tall, slim, fair, with the glow of health on her cheeks, and the light of hope in eyes that vied with the blue of the ocean.

The man grave, thoughtful, detached, leaning a little forward without lowering a head that was naturally poised somewhat backward, with an air

too cool to be defiant, and too indifferent to be self-satisfied. More the air of a man who, after much seeing and doing, has made his own groove in the world; has made up his own mind about most things; and chooses henceforth to walk in that groove in a detached fashion, neither giving nor asking anything of his fellows beyond the common courtesy of daily being. He was dimly aware that another passenger had chosen, like himself, to look forward instead of backward, but he was not interested, and merely recognized her sex by a flutter of skirts and veiling in the wind. Evelyn Harcourt was not interested either. The world held nothing for her just then but enchanting blue distances, and foam-flecked billows, and wind-swept, cloudless heavens, which were all—~~all~~—the future. The blue distances were peopled with dreams, and all the nameless possibilities life holds for those on her threshold; the foam-flecked billows were laughing up at her as they rushed her onward; the heavens smiled down from Infinity tenderly, enfoldingly, with the smile of the God who sees the aim and the end and the quest, apart from the conquest.

The woman was passing fair to look at, with the enduring fairness of the fresh, frank, generous-hearted English girl, the typical mother of the men who have made England great. And the man was only aware that a person of the petticoated sex stood forward instead of aft.

The man was brown and sinewy; deep-eyed, deep-chested, straight-limbed, with refined features, steady gaze, close-cropped hair, well-dressed, well-groomed, with just that same pleasing Eng-

lish freshness which makes a certain type of Englishman testify to his country's power wherever he may be, without uttering a word.

And the woman, gazing into a sun-bathed future, knew only that a passenger in male attire was watching the sea's blueness.

It was not until she turned away that she cast a passing glance at her companion, and noted vaguely, scarcely knowing it, that he was youthful and good-looking. It was only when a magazine slid to the deck beside him and he had picked it up, that Ranger Metcalfe, returning it with a little bow and a raised cap, noticed casually that his petticoated companion-outpost was a girl with the bluest eyes he had ever looked into, and hair that was neither chestnut, nor gold, nor flaxen, but a beautiful blending of all three.

And then, straightway, they both forgot.

They remembered again when they found themselves side by side at dinner, each bounded by the empty chairs of unfortunate passengers who, in limp heaps on their bunks, probably felt as if they would never want to touch food again as long as they lived.

Evelyn thought it curious, and was rather glad. She had felt dreadfully shy at entering the big saloon alone among all those strange people, and been in nervous trepidation as to whom she would have to sit beside for seventeen days, three times each day. When the steward conducted her to the seat next to Ranger Metcalfe, she knew she had been fortunate, for already she had made the discovery that a first-class passenger list, even on a Union-Castle liner, includes a good many pas-

sengers one would certainly not sit beside daily from choice. Ranger Metcalfe, on the other hand, what of him was not indifferent, was annoyed. He would have preferred an elderly man who was engrossed in the menu on one side, and someone as silent as himself on the other. Certainly he would not have chosen a lady, because that meant he would have to say "Good morning" at breakfast, and hand her the last piece of toast, when he wanted it himself and was in a hurry to be off. He would also have to remember to pass her the salt and pepper at lunch and dinner, though there would at least be no further necessity to say "Good morning."

As a matter of fact, he had told the steward to seat him between two men, but evidently the fool had blundered, and it would be a confounded nuisance to move now. Moreover, a man might insist on talking; might even compel him to listen to his views on the Licensing Bill and the Education Bill; to avoid any further discussion of which was one reason, so Ranger told his friends, why he was hurrying back to the veldt; and at least this fair-haired girl looked quiet. He imagined she would not talk unless he did, and as he was a past master in the art of keeping silent, he might get his meals in peace yet.

To give her no wrong impression at the beginning, he let her reach the pepper and salt for herself, calmly going on with his own soup, and then he turned away to order some wine. Evelyn, not being in at all a communicative mood either, was rather relieved, and, without any self-consciousness, amused herself with an interested survey of

such of the passengers who were still "above board."

So they went on through course after course, and the only time the man spoke was when her napkin slipped to the floor, and he said a matter-of-fact "Allow me." Evelyn began to wish he would say something else. It was growing a little embarrassing, after all, this continued silence, though a sidelong glance revealed the fact that he was entirely unperturbed, and merely enjoying his dinner. At one moment the thought crossed her that he was shy, and she felt she ought therefore to make an effort to put him at his ease, but the sidelong glance left her entirely undeceived on that score. No "shy" man could possibly have worn that unperturbed, detached air. It was far more likely that he had forgotten she was there. When, however, he mechanically handed her the salt with the sweets, a sudden little demon of mischief possessed her. "Thank you," she said quite seriously, "it was with the last course I wanted it, and the one before." The man did not smile, but she saw a little flicker of his eyelids, and a gleam underneath.

"I am sorry," he said, and she liked him none the less that he did not attempt an excuse.

As she prepared to go, however, he delivered himself of one speech.

"Before you reach the end of your voyage, if this is your first, I might tell that you will be grateful there was at least one silent passenger on board."

He went calmly on with his cheese as if he had uttered the merest commonplace, but glancing

down, Evelyn saw that same lurking gleam, and felt the attraction of the strong, clever face.

"And shall you always pass me the salt with my sweets?" she asked lightly, as she moved away.

But she did not know that as she passed out at the entrance, a pair of sleepy eyes casually took note of her; nor that, in the ordinary course of events, it was a compliment in itself for Ranger Metcalfe to take the trouble to observe any woman.

VII

THE FOURTH DAY

It was four days before Metcalfe made the discovery, which was made by everyone else on board in the first twenty-four hours, that she was going out to marry General Sir Henry Mahon. This was because he had relaxed in no way from his unsociable beginning, and he still addressed her an average of about two remarks per meal—the morning salutation acting as one at breakfast. Yet there was no longer any embarrassment—partly because Evelyn's neighbour on her other side proved a talkative gentleman, who was only too ready to monopolize her, and partly because she

was of an understanding turn of mind. She recognized more quickly than most people would have done, certainly more quickly than anyone on board, that whatever he appeared superfluously, he was not in reality either taciturn, morose, or proud as various passengers chose to designate him. She saw almost at once that he was merely silent.

And if he did not wish to talk, there was certainly no reason why he should. She could imagine him calmly stating that he had paid a large sum to the steamship company to carry him across the ocean, and the contract was between him and them alone. It had nothing whatever to do with other contractors, nor they with him, and if he chose to lead his own life on the ship, no one had any right to object as long as they were unhurt. In consequence, his chair was seen always in the same spot, carefully placed back to the deck, so that only the top of his head was visible, and here until 12.30 he sat and read, or pretended to read. At 12.30 he took a constitutional round the deck, when he had a way of veiling his eyes in a sleepy manner, as if he saw no one; but it remained just possible that in reality he saw more than anyone else. All afternoon he pulled his cap over his eyes and slept, and when he woke up, he had his tea brought to him on deck. After tea he took another solitary constitutional, and then returned to his book. In the evening he played bridge in the smoke-room, in a highly scientific manner, that repressed all outside gossip whatever. When spoken to, he always replied quietly and gravely, but in a way that effectually quenched anything approaching a conversation; and it was not in the least surprising that some of

the passengers quickly dubbed him highly superior in his own estimation, and very proud. Evelyn overheard them, and smiled a little. She knew already that had he also overheard, there would have been merely that curious flicker of the eyelid, and the gleam underneath, while the firm lips in no measure relaxed their firmness. And already she was glad, as he had said she would be. Because of his silence she placed her chair near his, and turned a little away from whoever might seat themselves on the other side. Metcalfe noticed the fact, but made no sign. If it was a safeguard of silence she sought, she was very welcome to his unspoken protection. He did, however, go so far as to observe her again secretly. With his cap pulled well down over his eyes, he studied the ocean, and included her in his horizon. He was rather struck with her expression of suppressed and radiant anticipation. He saw that when she looked at the far, blue distance, she was seeing things farther away still, which made her very glad. At such times she was surprisingly oblivious to all around her. There might have been no ship at all—no distinguished passenger list—no ardently polite and attentive young soldiers hovering near her chair—no silent, sleepy eyed, unsociable companion guarding her privacy on one side—nothing at all but a vista of blue distances—

“A world of happy water, whence the sky
Glowed goodlier, lightening from so glad a glass,
Than with its own light only”

Only this; and whatever it was that had lit that

light of gold and in a rich in her eyes, and her face was at look of noble, satisfied content. Mercante entered a little later, and said, "something," and though he had guessed it was not until the fourth day that he knew.

That was the morning when he first spoke to her meals. He saw her looking round, as if for the duty steward, to get her chair. And without the slightest preliminary, he said—"I'll get it. Wait here a moment." Then he walked down the deck, and presently returned carrying the chair and placed it beside his own without a word. Only as they seated themselves, he glanced into her face, and remarked, "If you want to dream, you are less likely to be disturbed here than anywhere."

Under the sleepy lids she saw the twinkle. "And what if I want to talk?" she asked. A little irresistible smile hovered over his lips. "Then I am afraid you must invite a friend to support you on the other side."

With an answering smile, that was like a ripple of sunlight over quiet water, she said, "But if I want to talk to *you*."

"You couldn't. I've nothing to say. You will certainly get far more pleasure out of your dreams." With a soothing sense of understanding, they opened their books and commenced to read.

But after a time the man grew bored with his book, and chose the prospect, instead, of a blue outlook that included the charming figure beside him. She was dressed in a well-cut tailor-made white serge, and she wore a soft straw hat swathed with an exquisite blue chiffon veil, which continued in billowy blue folds about her face and shoulders.

Yet, looking out from blue into blue, nothing seemed quite so blue as her eyes. And to the watcher it seemed a particularly uncommon blueness. Nothing beady or wax-dollyfied about it; nothing aggressive; rather a blue of lights and shades and shadows, like the ocean, enhanced by a curious dark rim round the outer edge of the iris. A blue that seemed to hold a whole world of dreams and hopes and aspirations, and could yet dance suddenly with mirth, as when the sun ripples over the dreaming silence of the sea.

And then the little proud nose, with its delicately curved nostrils; the mouth that was so serious unless it twitched at the corners; the calm, serene brow; the finely moulded chin; the complete whole, that was best of all in its unfailing attribute of strong, quiet, womanly restfulness. Yet it was into some future, perhaps near, perhaps far, that one unconsciously looked for its richest fulfilment. At present there was almost too much of the enthusiastic self-sufficiency of youth. She was strong without knowing what strength might have to mean. Out of her strength she would attain; but she had yet to learn a great deal concerning the educational uses of barriers, and baffling, and failure. She knew black from white, and white from black; but she knew almost nothing of the subtle shades of grey that make up so much of existence, and about which it is good to know, if one is ambitious to attain power and influence. She was a little over-self-reliant with the glorious, sweeping, splendid idealism of youth.

The sleepy eyes, that seemed to see nothing at all, had yet managed to perceive a good deal of this,

and had come to the conclusion that the fallow-ner of so many perfections might be extremely irritating. He could imagine, for instance, her sweeping and awful condemnation of some women friends he had known, who were, in their way, extremely good sorts. Certainly they were more grey than white, but this cleared-eyed girl would equally certainly condemn them as the blackest black. And then, he knew quite well that she would err on the side of expecting too much of everybody and everything; and she would probably be excessively irritating in her emphatic and decided views as to what one ought to do and ought to leave undone. And yet she attracted him more than any woman under thirty he had known. Thirty to forty, or even forty-five, was his favourite age, for then, if a woman had not attained to understanding, she never would, and one could leave her alone; but he did not remember ever before being drawn to anyone in what he described as the chrysalis stage. Not that he was exactly drawn now; but she had some indefinable attraction which, as well as her accommodating silence, led him to place her chair near his own, and which now lured him into including her in his prospective horizon. Of one or two things he felt quite confident. She would not fire small talk at him. She would not make the smallest attempt whatever to make him fall in love with her. She would not, in fact, treat him as anything much but a bulwark of silence that happened to suit her mood. And that was why, though she did not know it, he did her the honour of seeking her company and including her in his horizon.

Moreover, on that fourth day, when she seemed

vaguely to become aware that his reading was a pretence, and after a momentary hesitation turned her eyes to his, he was not as irritated as he might have been.

As a matter of fact, he was just wondering what she would say, supposing she did look up and discover his scrutiny. When he had the opportunity of hearing, it was not at all what he had imagined. Evelyn looked serenely into his face and remarked:

"You are not playing fair. You know I did not sit here to be . . . well . . . stared at."

"I am sorry." Then he added, with a little smile, "You put me under the painful necessity of quoting that dreadfully moth-eaten phrase, 'A cat may look at a king.'"

"Only with the king's permission, as a rule."

"Well, now I have apologized, may I fall back upon another banality, and say I should like to offer you a penny for your thoughts?"

"Certainly," and the grave mouth twitched; "they will take quite an hour to relate, so you will be very properly punished."

"Then I will show you that I can take a merited punishment like a man."

She looked back again to the sea, and her expression grew somewhat dreamy.

"To begin with, then, I am engaged to be married, and I was thinking of my *fiancé*."

Without the smallest change of expression, he shot a glance at her that was like a search-light, swift, sudden and almost instantly veiled. The kind of glance that made one wonder if this man so persistently lowered his eyes because he knew that, however immobile and composed his features might

be. His eyes, so expressive and so keen, refused all domination of will, and expressed themselves in spite of him. Perhaps he knew that. However cleverly he imposed himself upon his neighbours as just a careless, lazy, good looking, unscrupulous man, his eyes, if seen too distinctly, gave him away.

Certainly it had not occurred to him that she was going to be married, and with equal certainty he would not have wished her to know that he was surprised.

"And is your *fiancé* in South Africa?"

"Yes, in North-Eastern Rhodesia."

He still veiled his surprise, as he remarked, "I live in Rhodesia? I am going back there now."

"Are you?" and the blue eyes had a humorous as well as an interested expression, as they turned to him. "How odd that we should meet like this. Do you live in North-Eastern Rhodesia?"

"No, North-Western. I have a cattle ranch close to Livingstone. What is your *fiancé's* name?"

"Sir Henry Mahon," with a charming little air of diffidence.

"Sir Henry Mahon, the Administrator? . . ." and for once the eyes scarcely troubled to veil their astonishment—only, as it happened, the woman was not looking.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I know him slightly."

There was a short pause, during which Evelyn felt vaguely that something antagonistic had come into being, but she quickly overcame the feeling and ran on:

"Of course, he is a good deal older than I am; but I do not mind that in the least. I have always

liked men between forty and fifty much better than young men; and then, Sir Henry is very young in his ways."

Oh! the sublime self-confidence of youth! The man veiled his eyes again quickly, and looked down at the waves below them. He would have been sorry for her to see the cloud in them, mingled with a faint gleam of amusement, a faint shadow of apprehension, and a certain incredulous non-comprehension. Suddenly she glanced at him.

"Shall I tell you more, or do you want to be silent again?"

"Tell me more." He hesitated. "As we are both bound for Rhodesia, I am naturally interested."

"We have only been engaged a short time, just before he came out in March. My father is the rector of a village in Hampshire, and he paid a visit to Lord Southbrook, who lives at The Hall, at Christmas. He stayed some time, and we met often, and then he asked me to come out to Rhodesia to marry him. I am very happy," she finished naively.

He stole a covert glance at her. No, it was impossible—he thrust the unwelcome thought aside. No woman with eyes like that ever sold herself for title and position.

And yet? . . .

The unspoken, tacit understanding of friendship between them enabled him to suggest casually, "You seem to have decided pretty quickly. Rhodesia is a far country."

A very faint flush deepened in her face. "Not exactly. Just at first . . ." she probed about for words. . . . "I . . . I . . . was a

little overpowered and overawed. I was a little afraid of him, and I felt too young and countrified to be his wife. But he showed me that he was very much in earnest, and father spoke to me of all I might do in such a position of influence—and in the end I was very glad. You see, I'm rather a romantic, enthusiastic sort of person, and I shall be much happier with Sir Henry feeling I am achieving some good, even if he is twice my age, than I should have been with—perhaps—one of the curates," and she smiled a little.

"And was there no alternative?" he could not resist asking.

She seemed a little surprised, as she answered simply, "I wanted none."

Metcalf shot another of those keen, probing glances at her, and suddenly got up.

"You must tell me some more another time" abruptly. "I must walk now." He strode down the deck and leaned a moment over the rail, looking at the sea.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Is it possible she is going to marry Mahon? . . ."

THE SILENT RANCHER

VIII

AFTER THE DANCE

THE discovery of the fourth day certainly made no difference in their tacit understanding of friendship; on the contrary, it increased it, in spite of the continuance of that first vague feeling on Evelyn's part that something was antagonistic. Whatever it was, she contrived to ignore it, and further showed her perspicacity in realizing that, though he never went so far as to say so, he liked her to sit and talk to him occasionally.

After the first days, however, when the sports commenced, she was less at liberty, as she was dragged into them by energetic members of the committee, and at all hours of the day there were heats to play off in the deck games.

At other times hot and breathless ladies tore down the deck after potatoes, and young menrimmed hats, or sat on the floor and were fed with water in a teaspoon by some obliging lady-friend. Much hilarity was produced by a noted general attempting to chalk the pig's eye; and much boredom by little girls who skipped until the poor umpire was driven to protesting that he could count no further in such an atmosphere.

Needless to relate, the Silent Rancher still kept his chair in an obscure corner, and still watched the sea's blueness with only the back of his head

visible to the crowd. Public opinion had in the meantime softened towards him, partly because he gave handsomely to the subscription fund, partly because no one could honestly say he gave himself airs, and not a little because the ladies' had discovered that he had charming manners when there was any occasion to show them, and was, after all said and done, the most distinguished-looking man on board. A book, or a paper, or a cushion picked up by Ranger Metcalfe, with a grave lifting of his cap, was in some way even better than one picked up by the noted general, who had a very red face, fiery blue eyes, and was palpably aware of his own importance. At the first organized dance there was a good deal of speculation among the fair partners as to whether he would dance, their hopes being quickly dashed by the familiar back portion of his head showing through a smoke room window, engrossed in bridge. When the bridge was finished, for a time the glow of a cigarette in a dark corner might or might not have proclaimed his presence; but as the smoker evidently faced the deck, it was more likely not. In this instance, however, probability was at fault, for the owner of the cigarette was Ranger Metcalfe, and he did face the deck. At the same time, it might be declared a compromise, as he did not watch the people; he scarcely knew they were there. Under the lowered lashes, unshaded now by any drooping cap, but secure in the darkness, the keen eyes followed a certain fair head which carried itself so royally among the dancers. And once again, through his unperturbed exterior, the windows of his soul proclaimed that he was puz-

plea. Among the somewhat commonplace passenger list she had such an air of distinction. She seemed to him a woman in a thousand, or at any rate the promise of one; a girl who might have married almost anyone; and yet she was going to that far off land to bind herself for ever to this man Mahon.

It made him clench his teeth together, and again that hateful thought crossed his mind—was it the title and position? If so, he had small pity for her. Of course, people could do as they liked; he was never one to pass judgment; but also he would emphatically not waste any pity on a woman who sold herself for power and place. He felt almost convinced about it that evening, and somewhat sarcastic and irritable in consequence, when, to his surprise, the tall graceful figure approached his corner with perfect naturalness, and remarked, "I knew you were here and I've been longing to join you; but they wouldn't let me off before." She took the chair beside him, and turned her face to the night, adding, with a little smile, "Don't be alarmed. I am not going to talk."

"Don't you want to dance, then?"

"Not any more. The deck is very tiring."

"And what of the partners?"

"They are all right. I should probably have kept on to the very end a few months ago."

"But now you prefer to dream?" The spark of the cigarette was no longer visible to the dancers: as if lured by habit, it shone placidly toward the sea.

"Yes."

They sat in silence a few moments, and then she

said. "If it wouldn't bore you very much to talk, tell me something about Livingstone and Fort Jameson. I don't want to get an entirely wrong impression."

"I do not know Fort Jameson, except that it is very pretty, and very parochial. I have heard it said that what Fort Jameson thinks is what the world thinks, for the people who live there; and much of the monotony and aloofness is amply compensated by a comfortable sense of self-importance, which everyone deceives himself is believed by his neighbour. I have even heard that any unfortunate new-comer, making the slightest slip concerning the relative degrees of officialdom's wives, is hopelessly and irremediably condemned as ill bred by the insulted lady. If he is foolish enough to mind, however, one feels he is too foolish to commiserate with." A sudden thought struck him. "It is a long time since North-Eastern Rhodesia was graced by a lady at Government House. Perhaps now? . . ." significantly.

She did not speak for a few minutes, and then she told him, with a shyly confiding air, "I hope very much that it will be a happier place for many when I am at Government House. I want so much to make it especially homely for all the exiles; particularly, perhaps, the men. I know you will not misunderstand me. One might have such a tremendous influence for good—don't you think?—being at the head in a small place like that. I have a sort of motherly feeling already for all the lonely men. I should like them to feel they could always find sympathy and friendship at Government House if they wanted it. I should like to feel that

being able to do so kept some of them better men than they might, perhaps, have been, if there were no such homely meeting-place."

The keen eyes were full of questioning as they probed her face in the dim light, questioning which merged again into that fitful expression, in which a gleam of amusement mingled with apprehension.

"You speak as if you meant to fight 'red tape' single-handed."

"I am going to ignore it," with a seriousness which was wholly sweet. "Because I am at the head of the hostesses, I want to make the lowest clerk feel he is as welcome as the head of his department. I worshipped our dear Queen Victoria, and I have been reading her life." She gave a little deprecating smile, which he felt, rather than saw. "In my little way, up there, I want to be like her to the people over whom my husband is head."

He looked away to the heaving waves, and his face grew rigid. A thought went through him like a sword-thrust. "Mahon will break her heart—curse him!—curse him!—curse him!"

He felt he could not bear to see the quiet light of lofty idealism in her face, and he moved restively, finally remarking with a touch of lightness—"And have you told Sir Henry Mahon of your wishes? He would be very interested."

She missed the veiled sarcasm, and only replied simply, "Yes, he is. He hates petty, bigoted conventionality as much as I do; but a man cannot do much alone. I know he will help me when we are married."

Metcalfe's thoughts flew back to the self-important general, whom he had last seen, strutting like

a small turkey-cock, on board a ship, where his inherent, impenetrable snobbishness was a byword among the very crew. He remembered an evening when, sitting alone, as was his wont, the great little man had sauntered up with a magnanimous air, and remarked grandiloquently, "Awfully boring, these voyages. I notice you prefer to keep to yourself, Metcalfe, as I do. One can't, of course, know these sort of people, even on a ship."

"Ah," he had replied calmly, "you are judging too kindly. I am not General Sir Henry Mahon, and it is the people who do not want to know me."

And this was the man she positively talked of helping her to fight red-tapeism, and make Government House homely to all. How could she have been so blind? Who had helped the most snobbish of snobbish soldiers to throw dust into her eyes?

He felt more and more irritated—irritated with her: irritated with whatever influence had biased her; irritated with Fate, who must surely even now be mocking.

"I wouldn't be over-sanguine at first," he advised. "It is difficult to change a groove of long standing, and you are sure to meet with a great many disappointments. For instance, Fort Jameson may not lend itself naturally to the 'homely' idea; it may even resent it."

"I have thought of that, and I shall not let myself be easily discouraged."

"There is another point," he ventured. "Conventionality, that is rigidly adhered to in one form in South Africa, is sometimes very lax in another. Morals, for instance, are allowed a considerable margin."

She coloured slightly, but looked before her with steady eyes.

"That was one of my chief thoughts. If there is purity at the head, it filters down. I should like my little court"—with a sweet gravity—"to love purity."

The man grated his chair harshly, and flung his cigarette down to the waves, where it hissed a passionate indictment for aim—"Purity at the head! O God!—purity!—and she was going to marry, Alahou!" He grew conscious of a dull, unreasoning anger. At that moment, if he could, he would gladly have strangled her *fiancé*, and sent her back in the next ship to the little Hampshire vicarage. Then he wondered if, by one or two judicious hints, he could at least help her, by preparing her mind for a wider view of certain things before she arrived in their midst. Sir Henry, of course, he must leave quite alone; but he dimly surmised once again her present inability to see any shades of grey. He felt that she must, at any rate, if she was not going to be a crushing failure, realize that there *was* grey, as well as black.

While he probed in his mind for an opening, she gave him one.

"What about Livingstone? . . . I shall probably have to wait there a few days before Sir Henry arrives. Are the people the same?"

"There are so few at present."

"They have no lady at Government House either?"

"They have now. Mrs. Leven, the wife of the Secretary to the Administration, usually presides,

as she and her husband live with Mr. Cardington."

"And is she nice?"

"Charming," with unmistakable warmth

She glanced up with interest, and he took the opportunity.

"She is the divorced wife of Colonel St. Maur, you know, and Captain Wynyard Leven was the co-respondent."

IX

A CONVERSATION WITH A MOTIVE

SHE took it exactly as he had expected she would.

He saw the delicate lips grow rigid, the steady eyes strained, while her hands gripped suddenly the arms of her chair. She did not, however, make any comment, nor seem disposed to. Therefore Metcalfe continued the subject, speaking purposely in that quiet, natural, rather careless way of his, which always gave the impression he was too lazy to be more than half-serious.

"Wynyard Leven, her husband, is also a delightful man. Everyone is immensely fond of both of them. If you are delayed there at all, I think you will like it. Mrs. Leven will be able to give you a

lot of valuable hints about the life and the climate, and she will be delighted to show you the Zambesi and the Falls."

Still the eyes looked steadily ahead, and the lips in no whit relaxed.

"There is a comfortable hotel at the Falls, is there not? I think I should prefer to remain there if I am delayed."

"You would be rather lonely without any friends, and you would not be able to see the Falls nearly so thoroughly. I think you would be much more comfortable at Government House. Don't you think so yourself?"

He seemed to be waiting for an answer, so she said quietly—"I think, probably, that Mrs. Leven and I have so little in common we should not get on well together."

"But she is charming; you are certain to like her. Why do you think you have so little in common?"

She looked down the deck as if she would gladly change the subject, but the lazy eyes, even in the darkness, had a certain compelling light, and moreover they meant to be answered.

"Why do you think you will not like Mrs. Leven?" he reiterated.

"Why do you make me say it? You will only think I am old-fashioned and narrow minded! . . . I am quite sure I could not like a divorced woman."

"Why not?"—the eyes were more compelling than ever.

She moved her hands restlessly. "Surely you do not need me to explain. When I care for people

I must both respect and admire them. How could I do either with her?"

"I am able to do both."

"It is impossible. You may admire her because she is pretty, or clever, or something; but how *can* you respect her?"

"Why should I not respect her?"

If Evelyn had not been so perturbed, she must surely have remarked his extraordinary and unaccountable persistence; so widely was he departing from his usual habits.

"Can you respect anyone who breaks vows; the most sacred and binding vows in the world? Can you respect any woman who deserts the man she has sworn to be faithful to, and goes to live with another? If she will break one vow, she will break others. She cannot be worthy of respect."

"And may I not respect her for other traits—apart altogether from these you name—which seem to me to be worthy of respect?"

"They cannot count beside the other; nothing can whitewash her faithlessness. That is black, and it colours the whole."

He leaned forward suddenly—

"Might it not, perhaps, be grey?"

"I do not know anything about grey. I know of black and white. I know that to break a solemn oath taken before God's altar is black."

"Ah, my dear little girl," in unexpected, poignant tones, "Heaven send you soon a wider understanding!"

He leant back a moment, lost in thought, and then took out his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette with a return of the old serenity. One

felt instinctively that for that occasion he had said all he meant to, and now in a moment they were back on their usual plane, watching the sea in unruffled repose. Only the woman's eyes were dark and a little troubled, and her slender hands still gripped the arms of her chair. At last she got up.

"I am tired, and it is late; I think I will go to bed."

He stood up to say good-night with his usual quiet courtesy. Evelyn hesitated.

"I expect you think I am dreadfully narrow minded, and I am sorry that you should . . . but . . . but . . ." nervously.

"I understand," and his voice was extraordinarily kind. "I only think that you have yet a good deal to learn; and I hope that the learning will be made easy for you. Good-night. Sleep well."

"Good-night," and she moved away along the deck, leaving him alone.

For some time he sat on, looking into the night sphinx-like and aloof; yet, for a close observer there were grey depths of trouble in his half-closed eyes. Why she, of all people, should be going to marry Sir Henry Mahon grew more and more bewildering. At first he had been only vaguely regretful that such as she should be given to such as he; but to-night the regret stirred a lower depth.

Young and unsophisticated she might be, and such women as a rule bored him; but she was something vastly more besides, and as the knowledge grew upon him, it stirred the protective faculty that is in all nice men.

And Ranger Metcalfe was a nice man; nice in

the best sense of the word, implying all that one seeks first in manhood. His rigid unsociableness was not, perhaps, always polite; it certainly made him enemies among small-minded people; but on the other hand, it was entirely sincere. There was nothing behind it, no mannerism, no affectation, no snobbishness; he was silent by nature. There was not even any bitterness, and no cynical disdain. The unhappy love affair with which he was sometimes credited as a reason was a chimera. He had never had a real love affair, and would have pronounced it extremely unlikely that he ever should have. The predilection of the fair sex to chatter was quite sufficient to make him shun them as a general rule, and to frustrate their innocent attempts at beguiling them into friendship. In the ordinary course of life there is little enough scope for a woman to attract a man by silence. Conventionality allows of too few and too short opportunities for the upspringing of that rare bond of sympathies, which are not, as a rule, born at dances, or dinner-parties, or fashionable seaside resorts. Hence Metcalfe had travelled placidly to his thirty-seventh year without suffering the pains and hopes, the disillusion or the glad awakening of love. And all the time his habit of silence had grown upon him. Since he betook himself to the Colonies, first to British Colombia, and then to North-Western Rhodesia, it had become a second nature. The absence of anyone to talk to in the ordinary course of a lonely Colonial life, which breeds an unusual habit of silence in most men, had but intensified in him what was already there before. When he was at home now, which was

very seldom, his sisters addressed questions to him all day long, for fear, they said, he should lose his power of speech. They chafed him unmercifully, and delighted, whenever possible, to get him cornered with a particularly talkative woman. And Ranger took it all with the same sleepy, indolent smile, or perhaps no smile at all, merely a hidden twinkle, when the talkative lady worsted in the long run, would take herself off in disdain or despair. Yet how they adored him, those four lively sisters in England, who were as gay and go-ahead as he was silent and meditative! Neither the eldest brother, who had followed a distinguished father into the Cornuaught Rangers, nor the second, who was a dreadfully earnest Sapper, had ever been quite so dear as the third and last, who was born when his father was in command of the regiment and named after it. Perhaps, in the beginning, it was because he was always so reliable. If they were in any scrape, Ranger would always get them out, if anyone could. It was Ranger who helped them with their lessons in the school days; Ranger who gave them pocket-money; Ranger who took them about London; Ranger, in fact, who did everything except talk to them, or let himself be made a martyr of at their parties. For though he was good-natured to a degree up to a certain point, no one ever took advantage of him, and even the sisters he spoilt knew exactly where the dividing line came to his leniency. But it was partly because of them the grey depths were so troubled, that night Evelyn said good-night rather painfully, and went away along the deck, leaving him alone. He knew that, had Sir Henry Mahon

been the Viceroy of India himself, he would not have liked one of his sisters to marry him. He commented that Evelyn must be about the age of the youngest; but apparently she had no silent, meditative brother, with a veiled twinkle in his grey eyes, to stand between her and the possible wreck of her happiness.

He got up and leaned over the rail, looking out into the serene, star-lit spaces. How peaceful it was, how majestic, how remote! The insignificance of the planet he was on, amidst the other planets, lost itself in the splendour of the whole glorious conception of which it was a part. It was difficult to believe, looking out thus upon an infinity of worlds and solar systems, and the great, grand, rolling majesty of the ocean, that the little creatures in the gaily-lighted saloons behind him had such power to hurt each other—could so stoop to hurt each other—could be so petty, and narrow, and non-comprehending, in the presence of the unceasing wonder of the universe. Whatever form or attributes one's own individual conception gave to the Deity, surely it was not too much to allow other individualities, other conceptions, without cavilling. He felt, for instance, without going so far as to put it into words, that were Evelyn Harcourt to come into contact with his views on religion—if they could even be called views—she might again have occasion to see only black, and no grey. And all the time one could only respect her transparent sincerity, and her honest endeavour to be true to all truth as she saw it. The fault, if her narrowness could be called such, he felt, was not in her; and something within him rebelled at

the system of upbringing and education which dwelt only on what presumably *should* be, instead of also upon what *is*; that encouraged a drawing aside of garments, without any attempt to comprehend; that rigidly guided along a beaten track, with the windows of the soul metaphorically boarded up, that nothing unseemly might be even looked upon—a system of education that could achieve all this, and yet, when her whole life's joy or sorrow was at stake, calmly hand her over to a man who, in his heart of hearts, laughed at the mere notion of morals or principles or religion. Was her father some old-world, trusting parson, who had easily been beguiled by fair words? Was her mother too truly feminine to resist the mere sound of the phrase—"My daughter, Lady Mahon?" Or were there many hungry mouths to fill, and only the mere pittance England expected so many of her clergymen to bring up families upon? Did the girl herself see chances for young brothers, perhaps, and blind herself willingly for them, as well as for her own ideas of filling an influential part nobly?—ideas which were so dear of her, and, in the circumstances, so appallingly impracticable. He knew, even as he thought of it, that Gwendolen Leven, the very woman she judged so harshly, was far more likely to get hold of the lonely young men she spoke of, and raise their standard through her unfailing *camaraderie* and wise understanding of human nature as it is, than the young idealism and narrow horizon of this earnest-hearted girl, who saw only what she herself thought it ought to be.

He drew himself up, and looked a moment down the deck before retiring. "Well, no one could save

her now," was his thought, "for there, again, she would certainly sacrifice anything to her own idea of truth and constancy. She would go up to Rhodesia, and she would become Lady Mahon—and after that? . . ." He shrugged his shoulders with a touch of cynicism. After all, it was no affair of his. He did not know why he had let it trouble him even as much as it had. He half smiled as he remembered it was the accident of their sitting next to each other at meals. He smiled again, remembering the words with which she had left him the first evening—"Shall you always pass me the salt with my sweets?"

Of a truth, she had a quiet sense of humour, besides her perfect naturalness, to make her exceptionally engaging; and in the general perplexity one thing, at any rate, was perfectly comprehensible, and that was Sir Henry Mahon's wish to make her his wife. What he would make of her afterwards no one could surmise, but he was vaguely glad that he would not be near to see the final act, nor the way in which a wider understanding might come to her.

With which reflection he once more flung a cigarette-end rather impatiently to the waves, to follow the example of its kind, and hiss a protest upon much in general to the unheeding skies; and then passed down the nearly deserted deck to his cabin.

A CONVERSATION WHICH ENDS ABLEPTLY

THEY did not have another confidential *tête à tête* until the evening of the concert. In the meantime more heats were played off, more races run, and the ship had been much given over to frivolity.

Evelyn allowed herself to be persuaded to take part in most things, not so much because she wanted to, as because she did not want to appear to be giving herself airs. This she certainly did not, and from his quiet observation-ground, the Silent Rancher noted with approval that, though no small court was already being paid to her as the future wife of General Sir Henry Mahon, her manner never once lost its charming naturalness, nor changed its tone according to her notion of the social position of whoever she might chance to converse with. And he was not indifferent, either, to the fact that she always seemed to come back to him, when she could do so without exciting comment. He grew to listen for her footsteps approaching, and though he perhaps scarcely glanced up from his book, he liked the feeling that she was there, and was gratified that she showed such confidence in him. Whether he was reading, or whether he was thinking, or whether he was just slacking, he knew that he enjoyed it more if, under his lowered cap, he could see her pretty feet on the rail, and could feel through some subtle telegraphy

that she was occupying her chair. He hardly knew why, except, perhaps, that that instinct of protection made him glad she should come to him thus simply, when she wanted to get away from the rest. For no one ever disturbed the two chairs, where it was as if an imaginary notice proclaimed the fact that "Silence was requested."

The night of the fancy dress ball she had lingered a little while with him at the end, and they had laughed together over some of the costumes and commiserated over others. but there had been no time for a talk.

She herself was a Greek Hypatia in pale blue and silver, and he thought he had never seen anyone look lovelier in his life. The Grecian bands on her fair hair, gathered in a big loose knot high at the back suited her small, classic head to perfection, and her eyes seemed to glow more richly, deeply blue than ever. He noticed the extraordinary beauty of her arms, bare to the shoulder and adorned with silver bands; the slender, graceful curves of her breast under the loose draperies; and he had not been the healthy, full-blooded Britisher he was had not the sweetness of desire surged within him to hold in his arms anything so entrancingly fair to look upon.

But no hint of it showed in his face or manner, as they stood together watching the laughing, chattering groups of quaintly apparelled figures, admiring some, criticizing some, and laughing at others. Certainly no such thought entered the girl's head for an instant, and her steady eyes met his smilingly with just the calm unconsciousness he liked best to see.

She was amusing him with a description of how some half-dozen ladies, all of the "fat, fair and forty" type, had each wanted to appear as the Merry Widow, in a grotesquely tight drapery, and were with difficulty prevented from falling upon each other in wrath and fury. How a Greek Slave, draped in a sheet, had whirled round in a waltz until she was swathed like a pillar of salt, and could neither walk nor sit down. They both agreed that a charming Irish woman, with glorious auburn hair in a low knot on her neck, a kerchief round her neck, and a short petticoat, personating "Kathleen Mavourneen," was the most attractive character: and her husband, in a dressing-gown (of which he was inordinately proud) and a carrotty wig like a doormat, personating "a roystering monk, was the most amusing.

When a grotesque and horrible spectacle, supposed to be a prehistoric man, garbed in little else but a lion-skin, and waving naked arms and legs recklessly, came down the deck towards them, she shuddered a little, and turned to look at the sea.

"I suppose you've seen heaps of these sort of things?" she asked him.

"Well, I can hardly say I've seen them; but I've been on a good many ships where they were taking place," with a humorous expression.

"Do you mean that you didn't even watch?"

"I mean that I didn't even watch."

"But to-night? . . ."

"To-night was a special occasion. There was something worth watching."

She glanced at him inquiringly, and then a little pleased flush mounted to her cheeks, but she only

looked away again to the horizon in silence. At last :

"I wonder what you do in England when you go home for a holiday. You can't play bridge and read for weeks."

"I have not been home for a holiday."

"No?" "In surprise."

"I went home on business, and I was only in England two months."

"Really! weren't your people very disappointed?"

"I'm afraid they were. I have four sisters, who all joined together in inventing and carrying out various plans to make me miss my ship. The last one nearly succeeded. They hid the only available hat I had to travel in, with the result that I lost the few minutes' margin I had left looking for it—and unally jumped into the last train at Waterloo, after it had started, without a hat."

"And you couldn't stay longer with them?"

"No. I had to get back."

"You have not told me much about your ranch. Is it near Livingstone? Will you take me to see it. If I am delayed there?"

"I shall be delighted, if we can arrange transport. I always ride, but I have only one horse. The ranch is ten miles from Livingstone."

"It must be rather lonely, living out there alone. Do you mind it?"

"Not in the least. There is no occasion to talk, you see," and again the humorous light shone in his eyes.

She smiled. "All the same it must be very lonely."

"North Western Rhodesia is more or less full of lonely people."

"Tell me about them."

"There is not much to tell except that, in the outlying districts particularly there are some of the nicest men I have ever met in any Colony."

"And of course they are always alone."

"Nearly always. One gets accustomed to it, after a time."

"And do they all become as silent as you?" turning to him with an arch expression.

"Not all. Some," and he smiled whimsically, "develop an amazing faculty for yarning when they return to the company of men and live in an atmosphere of lions and elephants and ferocious natives, and hair-breadth escapes."

At that moment the lights began to go out, and Evelyn started to think she had remained on deck so late. She turned at once to say good night, noticing, as she did so, various grotesquely attired couples still lingering in many shady corners.

"It is not obligatory to retire when the lights begin to go out, you will observe," following her glance. He said it in jest, yet he was conscious of a vague regret that he would never see her as a Greek Hypatia again, and he wanted her to stay a little longer.

She gave him a half shy, half laughing glance as she answered, "I daren't risk losing my beauty sleep just now, and I shouldn't like to overtire your vocal organs." Then, with her filmy draperies fluttering round her one moment, and clinging adorably to her figure the next, with her small head held regally, and her hair like a pale halo as

she passed near a light, the sleepy eyes from the shadow watched her pass down the deck and out of sight. Only their sleepiness was belied by some other expression just then, and the watching stars, when he turned to them, twinkled knowingly and gleefully to each other.

But the night of the concert they were able to have quite a long talk. It was a remarkable concert, not to say dirge-like. The second-class passengers took part, and proved to be of a mournful turn of mind. One man, evidently with an eye to the applicability of the sentiment, droned dolefully "The Sailor's Grave." On receiving a hilarious encore, he smiled bashfully to the audience, and said all his other songs were in his cabin, but if they would not mind waiting until the end of the concert, he would give his encore then. "Wait till we're all dead," murmured a voice in the background, "and the same will do again."

"She Wore a Wreath of Roses," rather breathlessly rendered by a stout gentleman who had difficulty with his r's, got itself transcribed "She Wore a Weaf of Woses," and in the death scene at the end someone, restraining his feelings with an effort, got entangled in a sudden loud hiccough. "The Death of Nelson" was played on the cornet, and followed by a tenor solo, "The Star of Bethlehem."

Hopes were raised somewhat when a young lady mounted the extemporized platform, who, the previous evening, had been heard delighting an audience in the second-class saloon with "Stop yer Tickling, Jock," but when the old familiar opening stanza of "Sing Me to Sleep" sounded, the first-

class resigned itself to the inevitable, and wondered sorrowfully why they had so evidently been stigmatized by the rest of the ship as having a preference for death scenes, and no sense of humour. By the time a little girl had recited "The Wreck of the Royal George," they were past help, except those who could surreptitiously slip away for a little "pick-me-up" at the bar.

Ivelyn sought the Silent Rancher directly the concert was ended and she could escape, and at once regaled him with a humorous description of what he had missed, noting with an inner satisfaction, that was perhaps deeper than she knew, how thoroughly he appreciated her recital, in spite of his seeming non-responsive manner. For by this her instinct had sharpened surprisingly where he was concerned, and probably few who had known him for years understood more thoroughly the expression of his eyes, which were almost the sole index to his mood.

Then they discussed a book both had been reading, until a little wave of silence passed over them, and they sat and watched the night. Thus it chanced that two men, who so habitually frequented the smoke-room that they were quite unversed in the habits of the "deckites," but who had been lured from their fastness by the concert, strolled down the deck, and leaned over the rail close beside them. The two chairs in the quiet spot meant nothing to them, and even had they observed that they were occupied, they would not, as most of the other passengers, have been able to name the occupants off-hand.

For a moment or two neither Metcalfe nor

Felvelyn needed what they were saying, and then both were suddenly startled alert by the question :

"By the way, when you were in Egypt, I suppose you knew Sir Henry Mahon?"

"Knew him? . . ." echoed the second man, with unmistakable disgust in his voice—"I should think I did—the cur!"

"Ah! then it's true that he's pretty generally hated?"

"He's hated by every man who's ever served under him"—with conviction—"or held a civil appointment under him, or anything else. He's an insufferable cad, and a damned cur."

The first speaker gave a little laugh.

"You're pretty decided about it, anyway. He evidently needn't look for quarter in your direction."

"I've reason to be. I was under him for five years, and I know."

"I wonder why this girl is going to marry him. She seems particularly nice, and not the sort to run after a title."

The denouncer shrugged his shoulders cynically—"Why do women do anything? . . . Certainly they rarely know themselves. Mahon could be gracious enough if he liked, and men are scarce in England. All the same, I'd be sorry for any woman who was going to marry a cad like him. He would lead her a devil of a life, unless she were a thumping great woman, who could frighten him. He's none too brave, anyway."

For the two listeners there was a moment of tense, distressing silence, and then, to the relief of both, they moved away.

XI

THE DANGEROUS THOUGHT

FOR once in his life Metcalfe was nonplussed. For the life of him he could not think what to say. He kept his gaze turned away from her, yet he seemed to see distinctly the taut, strained attitude, the white face, the fixed, troubled eyes. He was thankful that there was nothing unusual in his remaining silent; and it was not the first time the habit had proved a refuge. Nevertheless, the silence was growing unendurable, when at last she broke it.

"Ought I to have spoken?" she asked, in a low, pained voice, without turning her head; and even in that uncomfortable moment he was conscious of a quiet thrill that her first words were an appeal to his judgment.

"No, I think it was wiser not."

"I shouldn't like to think I was afraid to," after a moment's thought "If he had not gone, I expect I should have."

"It was better not," he reiterated, and then added in a voice that was new to her, "No one would ever dream of taxing you with lack of courage."

In the midst of her perturbed thoughts, she was conscious of a sudden, swift gladness, which came and went.

She did nothing to show it, however, but sat on

in that fixed, strained attitude, looking straight before her into the darkness. So they were silent again for still Metcalfe had nothing to say that seemed in the least worth saying; though he felt she was suffering keenly, in spite of her undisturbed faith.

For he knew without being told that, however true the words might be, they had no meaning whatever for her, beyond the voicing of an individual opinion.

Perhaps, if it had been possible for him to add the weight of his testimony, her eyes might have grown clearer; but an indefinable sense that he was no longer unprejudiced held him silent until the moment of speaking had passed.

When she next spoke her words sounded a little irrelevant; but he knew her well enough now to follow her train of thought unaided.

"I suppose one must always aim at being useful," she said, addressing the darkness that was before them. "It is more important to try to be useful than to think only of being happy. A selfish happiness is quickly worn out, whereas, when one knows one is useful . . ." she paused.

"I think, as a rule, one can be more useful, if one is happy as well," he said.

"Why do you think so?"

"For one thing happiness is so useful in itself. Haven't you noticed what an atmosphere of brightness usually hangs around really happy people? They have an invigorating effect on everything in contact with them—which one cannot always say for useful people," he added with a sudden gleam.

She pondered it a moment, and then remarked,

"I have always been taught that one must be useful at all costs, and not think about happiness unless it comes of itself."

In the darkness, his expression was very engaging. "If I had a daughter," he said, "I should want her to be happy at all costs, and useful when usefulness came her way."

"If she was happy," he added whimsically, "I should know that she was good, and everyone who is both good and happy makes the world a better place to be in."

"Then you don't think happiness is very often just selfishness?"

"I am quite certain that it is not." He turned his face to her. "Don't you think you are just a little too earnest for your years? If . . ." he hesitated . . . "if you belonged to me, I should just want you to be as happy as the day is long, and let the usefulness look after itself."

The darkness hid the soft light in her eyes, as she said, "Then you would spoil me, and I should grow selfish and hard."

"I think not."

There was another long pause, and then she questioned—"I suppose public men always have enemies? . . . they can't possibly please everyone."

"Most public men probably do," guardedly.

She made a sudden plunge—"Have you . . . have you . . . known before that Sir Henry had enemies?"

"I knew he had fallen foul of men holding appointments under him."

"I wonder why."

He offered no solution, and presently she added—

I think, perhaps, he is naturally impatient with anyone who is rather slow. He may be different when he is married: it is easier to be patient when one is happy. I hope he will not make any enemies at all in future."

He felt, in spite of her quiet manner, she had received a shock, and was bravely endeavouring to reassure herself. He wished he could help her, but something he was growing a little afraid to face left him tongue-tied. He could only look out into the night silently, and feel again that mad desire to strangle Sir Henry Mahon—to strangle Fate—to kill—kill—something—anything—to relieve this confused, wordless sense of impotent anger.

Glancing towards him, she thought he looked unusually white, and his mouth a little sterner than usual. She thought also, though she hardly dared admit the thought, that he had the finest head of any man she had ever seen. Every line seemed to carry its own innate distinction, every feature to add its testimony to the hidden nobleness of soul, the complete whole to be stamped indelibly with the loftiest order of manliness. She wondered dreamily if he would ever marry, and then her thought ran on to what he might be to a woman he loved.

How would the lazy grey eyes look with the love-light in them? How would the strong, quiet face change before the face he would love, as only such men know how?

She looked back again to the heaving billows showing faintly in the starlight, and not all her

crosses would thrust aside a comparison that rather frightened her. Was there nobleness in that other face? was there power? was there kindness? as she now more fully recognized them. She knew there was strength—no one could possibly deny that; but strength may have a cruel tinge, and a strong will can sometimes crush. She recognized with growing alarm that such thoughts held danger, were almost treasonable, and with characteristic decision made a stand against them.

"I think I will leave you now. The concert-room was hot, and I have a slight headache."

He sat up with surprising alacrity, and gave her a swift, keen glance. It was earlier than her usual hour for retiring.

"Let me get you something for it—phenacetin, aspirin, anything you like; I have various remedies."

"Thank you—rest will be the best tonic. It is later than you think. Good-night."

"Good-night." He looked hard into her face and hesitated. "You . . . you . . . are not worrying . . . you will not lie awake, or let yourself fret, or . . ."

"No," and she tried to laugh reassuringly, "I shall not let myself remember. It would be too absurd to mind seriously."

As she moved away, he groaned inwardly. "And it's true," he muttered—"it's every word of it true. Curse him!—curse him!—curse him!"

In her cabin Evelyn lay awake far into the night and watched the stars through her port-hole. Once she got up and knelt on the couch with her face against the opening and prayed. Many time-

worn phrases, which souls in vague distress have offered on their knees to the blank wall of the heavens, passed her lips, bringing a certain sense of security and calm: yet through each and all sounded a dim note of premonition, of conscious danger, and of appeal, voiced in the most all-embracing prayer humanity can pray—"Lead us not into temptation."

She slipped back into the little bunk strengthened and refreshed, and yet, because the flesh is stronger than the spirit, or because sometimes they work hand in hand, in spite of a mistaken judgment that seeks to make them opposed, her last thought before she fell asleep was again the dangerous one—"How would his eyes look with the love-light in them?"

XII

THE END OF THE VOYAGE

It was not until the last evening that Gwendolen Leven was again alluded to, and then Evelyn herself introduced the subject. All through the day she had remembered that it was their last on the ship, and that an unexpectedly delightful voyage

was nearly over. She wondered a little if he remembered, and if he was sorry. And it seemed to her, looking back, that in some subtle fashion, all the way over, he had been helping her to arrive better prepared for the new life she was going to. Without actually robbing her of its rose-coloured aspect, he had yet managed to instil a certain amount of cautious reservation, and a foreknowledge that there would be many drawbacks to cope with.

And because she knew he had achieved this out of the kindness of his heart, for her good, she was doubly grateful, and doubly regretful to think how soon their roads must separate. She felt she had unconsciously grown a little dependent upon his judgment, and that after they had parted there would be no one who could quite take his place. It was hardly to be expected that he would miss her, and yet a little wayward thought kept wondering if he would. He had made no allusion to the near approach of the day of landing, and she was vaguely sorry.

In the evening, however, she was made unusually glad. There was an attempt to get up a bridge drive, and while they were still dallying over their dessert, the energetic promoter hurried up to ask Evelyn to join.

"I would rather not," she said hesitatingly, and at the same moment he was appealed to from a distant table, and left her for a moment to reply.

"Don't play," said Metcalfe, in a low, matter-of-fact voice. "It is our last evening on the ship."

"But you will be playing in the smoke-room?"
". . ." she questioned, a little longingly.

"Not if you will sit with me."

Her heart leaped foolishly, for she knew well enough it was no small thing for him to desert the smoke-room for the whole evening, and just then the promoter, with his paper and pencil, returned.

"You will play? . . ." and he began to write her name.

"Not to-night."

"Oh! but why not? . . . Indeed you must." and he went on writing.

Evelyn rose from her seat, and turned to move away.

"I shall not be able to play to-night," she said, with a certain natural dignity that was quite final.

She fetched a wrap, and then went to her seat in the corner with a book. He was there already, and smiled when he saw the book.

"Are you really going to read?"

"No, but I did not expect you for half an hour. You have finished your after-dinner smoke unusually early."

"With your permission I have not finished it," and he smiled into her serious eyes.

She smiled back at him, and sank down into her chair. They talked quietly of indifferent subjects until Evelyn herself struck a more personal note by asking suddenly:

"Is Mrs. Leven very pretty?"

"One would not describe her as pretty, I think. The word is altogether too insipid. She has a lovely face, and is one of the most attractive women I have ever known."

"Why is she so attractive?"

"That I can hardly tell you. Perhaps it is

THE SILENT RANCHER

"So she is just herself."

"I suppose she is bound to be interesting," reluctantly, "and no doubt she dresses very well."

"Extremely well."

"Doesn't she seem rather out of place there?"

"Not so much at Government House. She is the sort of woman who creates a kind of atmosphere of her own wherever she is."

She was conscious of a twinge of jealousy. He was so evidently among her warm admirers.

"Do women like her?"

"I can't say. There are so few women about, and I rarely, if ever, see her with them. You will like her if . . . if . . ." with a kind little smile, "you are able to get over your prejudices."

She was thoughtful for some moments, before she asked—"I suppose you thought me very narrow and bigoted the other evening, when I criticized her?"

"Not exactly. I recognized that you were mostly true to yourself."

"That was nice of you. You might have resented what I said on Mrs. Leven's account. I'm afraid I don't feel very different now. If I have to remain a few days at Livingstone, I should prefer to stay at the 'Falls Hotel.' If I can do so without offending anyone, I probably shall." She paused, then added, "Does Sir Henry know Mrs. Leven?"

"Yes. He met her when he last came out."

She asked him many things about other people in Livingstone and Fort Jameson, the only two places of any size in Northern Rhodesia; and then, when it was time to go she thanked him a little

hesitatingly for having made her voyage so pleasant.

He was sitting far back in the shadow, so that she could not see his face, and she did not know that a restless, hungry look had crept into his eyes. They seemed to be devouring her appearance line by line, painting some accurate mental picture that was to be indelible. And at the same time the keen brain was asking a question over and over.

"Am I to let her go on? . . . Must I let her go on? . . ."

No satisfactory answer seemed forthcoming, and so he sat silently watching her. He knew perfectly well by now that, if she were free, and he had a suitable home to offer her, he would not hesitate a moment trying to win her for himself. As it was he banished the thought as effectually as he was able. She was not free, and in his opinion a lonely Rhodesian cattle ranch was no suitable home for any delicately nurtured woman.

When he adopted his mode of living, matrimony had not entered his calculations. He had neither the wish nor the intention to marry. He loved animals, and he loved an unconventional, free life, and when he asked his father to let him have the expense of the army education he wished for him, to add to the money he had inherited from his mother, in order to start in the Colonies, he had thought, if he ever married at all, it should be when he was middle aged and ready to retire to England. That he might fall in love meanwhile had not occurred to him. Even now it was a little difficult to grasp, and he wondered if he was mistaken; yet, from away back in the shadow, his

As dwell yearning on the fair head that was neither flaxen nor chestnut, nor gold, but a blending of all three. He was glad that a few days after their landing their paths would separate. He was vaguely conscious of extraordinary depths in him self that, if thoroughly roused, might burst all barriers and trample down all obstacles. He felt, afar off, that he could not have lived near her if she was another man's wife. He would have ended by running away with her or something, if this passion stirring in his heart had a chance to grow. For, like so many quiet people, his quietness was all strength and calm depths that, once thoroughly roused, would sweep in a flood of which lighter people were incapable.

Even now he felt a little uneasy. A longing was creeping into his arms to hold her, and a yearning to touch the mouth with his that was so entirely sweet. Was he to let her go out of his life forever, and perhaps lose the keenest delight he could ever know? He felt his senses growing a little unmanageable, urged on by the voices of desire. "There is only the present," they said. "A hundred years hence, what will it matter if you were right or wrong? You will be ashes scattered to the wind then—and she also—and you will both have thrown away a supreme moment of bliss that you might have had. What is going to make up to you for losing it? Is it likely such a moment will come again? Already you have waited thirty-seven years. And you have a right to live to the utmost, as far as you can—the right of unconsulted existence—of being at all."

In the shadows a deeper longing was creeping

into the quiet eyes—a deeper longing and the gleam of smouldering fires. They were alone now in their secluded spot, with a space of deep, secure shadow on one side, and all around them the spell of the night, and the deep, rhythmic murmuring of the sea. From somewhere in the brightly lighted portion of the little floating city came the strains of singing, in other secluded spots, others who had helped one another through a tedious voyage were feeling the regret of parting. Yet it seemed to Metcalfe that the world was strangely remote on that one last evening; they might almost have been on a planet of their own, with only the sea and sky. He could not tell from her face whether she had any consciousness of the state of his feelings. At least he thought not, her eyes were so steady and calm. They steadied him. Could he under any circumstances risk disturbing that calm which was to him one of her most alluring attributes? He understood so thoroughly that it was in no way the inert placidity of some women, which usually becomes irritating beyond words after a time.

For however quiet and silent she sat, like himself, she never lost the air of thoughtfulness that saved her face from any suggestion of inanity.

Always he wondered what she was thinking of, and always he knew it was something worth while.

And as he watched her now, the ache of his longing turned into a loftier channel. Of a surety he would never forget her, but at least he could keep his memory sweet and clean, untarnished by any action he might so easily live to regret. The voices that echoed and re-echoed, "There is only

the present," he thrust aside by telling "himself that at least that present should be something they could each dwell upon as long as they wished without any hindering, soiling memory. So he sat quite still and watched her, and Evelyn knew nothing of what was passing in his mind.

"I am glad we have still a few days," she said, when she stood up to leave him. "You have been such a pleasant companion all the way over, it will be nice to have your company on another stage of my long journey."

"You are very kind." She thought his voice was a little less firm than usual, and he turned to lean on the rail, instead of awaiting her handshake. Then he gave a low laugh. "I have been eight voyages, and this is the only one that has not bored me to extinction."

Her colour came and went a little fitfully, but she only replied with lightness. "Let us hope we shall both be able to repeat our experience on the next stage."

She lingered beside him a little longer, and then held out her hand.

"Good-night."

"Good-night." He seemed to speak abruptly, and she moved away with a sudden sense of sadness. Their long, quiet hours had been so good and now they were over. They had belonged to the voyage, and the voyage was finished. They could scarcely even be friends now. Distance and circumstances would combine together to make it impossible. There was only the train journey left. At the other end of that Sir Henry would probably be waiting; he might even come to Buluwayo; and

then they were to be married at once. His manner seemed to say that he was thinking the same thoughts. It was indeed the end. Her step was slower than usual as she passed down the deck for the last time and her head drooped a little. She felt he might have been more cordial as it was the last evening, and after asking her to spend it with him. And yet what was the use of it? . . . They had to go their separate ways, and some day, perhaps soon, he, too, would belong to another. Thoughts that she seemed unable to control followed on the idea. How blessed she would be—that other woman; how blessed beyond most women! Perhaps if she had met men of his type sooner, in the parsonage home, she would have been led to choose rather the uphill path with someone nearer her own age than the ready-made success. She knew it would have appealed to her more if only there had been anyone to attract her. But in that little Hampshire village who had there ever been to win anything much from her except tolerance, until this noted soldier came, with his orders and medals and achievements; who seemed so immeasurably superior to the commonplace young doctor, the insipid curate, and the homely young farmers? It had seemed a high destiny to be his promised wife, and her imagination had run riot with dreams and plans of all she would do to be worthy of the position.

But then she had never met anyone in the least like Ranger Metcalfe, who, though he was merely a rancher in a lonely country, and possessed neither orders nor medals, was yet so rich in the distinction of a finely-tuned mind and manliness.

Well, she had chosen now, and another week would probably see her married. At all costs she must keep her promise, and hope that the interests of the new position would make up to her for this growing, undefinable sense of something that would be missing.

And in the shadow, directly she moved away, Metcalfe turned from studying the night and watched her pass away from him to her cabin. It was the end for him also—the end, he felt, of his first and last brief love story. He ground his teeth and clenched his hands, feeling again that blind impotent fury that, since it could not be he, it should be such a man as Sir Henry Mahon. He tried to comfort himself with the recollection that there were some people—mostly women to whom he, the general, had paid attentions, certainly—who declared him delightful; so perhaps a woman could be pleased in a way a man could not, and Evelyn might find some sort of happiness in spite of his fears. And then his thoughts said, “Yes, *some* women, but not her. She will look for the truth and sincerity that are in herself, and when she understands they are not there, it will break her.” He ground his teeth together again, and commenced to pace the deck restlessly, until he felt tired enough to sleep.

The next morning all was the bustled confusion of arrival, and those to whom it was fresh stood about gazing in interest and delight at Cape Town’s stately bodyguard, decked with a tablecloth of filmy morning mists. Metcalfe stood a little apart, gazing because he loved it. Yet he knew instantly when Evelyn appeared in the dis-

tance with a telegram in her hand, and a look of consternation on her face. He saw her glance hastily round until she descried him, and then come quickly to where he waited.

"I have had news," she said, and held the flimsy paper out to him.

"Am I to read it?"

"Please."

On the telegram was the message—"Trouble with natives on frontier—obliged to go—you are invited to Government House, Livingstone, until I can come, or escort found. Go there at once, and I will join you when possible, probably in a month."

She leaned over the rail, and looked at the mountain without seeing it. "Probably in a month," she repeated, as he folded it up. "Do you see that I may have to stay at Mr. Cardington's a whole month?"

"And why not?" He was looking down at the paper, hiding his eyes, in which had crept, unbidden a gleam of relief.

"I . . . I . . . would so much rather stay somewhere else. They are all such strangers. Must I go there?" She was again appealing to him, in a way that stirred his pulses.

"I think you would be wisest to do so."

"If I had only known in time to remain in England."

"I am rather glad you did not," with that characteristic whimsical expression.

Her troubled face cleared a little, but only a very little, and he saw she was genuinely perturbed.

"Come and have some breakfast," he said

fully "and then you will feel more cheerful about it."

They went down together to their last meal on board, and he made her laugh by an allusion to their first. He followed it up by a humorous story, and to the astonishment of their neighbours suddenly showed that he could be extremely entertaining if he liked.

He lingered purposely after the others had gone and when they were alone, changed his voice to one of solicitude, and a little dry humour blended.

Without any preliminary he suddenly remarked: "There is one splendid thing about Mrs. Leven, she never says an unkind word of anyone, and she is absolutely above all pettiness. You will, perhaps, find more virtuous conventionality and principle in many people, but it may also be inextricably mixed with much slandering and tale-bearing." He pushed his chair away and looked suddenly into her face, with a soft, smiling light in his eyes, "Remember it isn't wicked, supposing such a contingency should arise, to like a *divorcée* better than a highly virtuous lady who has a particular weakness for slandering her neighbours."

XIII

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

MUCH as Evelyn had enjoyed the Silent Rancher's companionship on the voyage, for some subtle reason she enjoyed it even more during their four days' train journey. Perhaps it was a little the absence of prying eyes. On the train it was not known that she was Sir Henry Mahon's *fiancée*, and probably would not have interested anyone if it had been. On a ship the passengers have to make the most of what of interest offers. In a train, even on a four days' journey, there is very little intercourse of any sort. Metcalfe contrived, with a little judicious management, to get a compartment engaged for her, and a half-side for himself next door, so that they could spend most of the day together uninterrupted.

And now that she was, accidentally, more or less in his care, she was astonished at his thoughtfulness. Every possible detail that could minister to her comfort he remembered, and instead of relapsing into his usual silence, he exerted himself to interest and entertain her, when he thought she was tired of reading. And all the time, although she was conscious of something vague and indefinable between them that was not of chance friends nor passing acquaintances, he never by act or word presumed upon their circumstances, nor

assumed any other guise than that of an old and privileged friend. And she could only at present be grateful to him, for the smallest symptom of anything other than this must have disturbed the perfect enjoyableness of those last few days. As it was, she dare let herself leave the future alone for the time being, and banish the painful memory of the conversation she had overheard on the ship, in quiet appreciation of his unusual efforts to be entertaining. There was no need to ask why he did it, no need for pros and cons, at all; Fate had unexpectedly given her a charming companion for her journey, and she had the sense to accept the good unquestioningly. Then they came to Buluwayo, where they had to change for the final stage of their journey: Metcalfe went off to inquire what time they had before the train left for Livingstone, and learned, with feelings he was not entirely capable of analyzing, that a train had gone off the line on the northern railway overnight, and there would be a delay of many hours; in fact, it was extremely unlikely any train could start before the next morning, and all passengers from the south would have to spend the night in Buluwayo.

"I'm so sorry, I'm afraid you'll be rather upset," he began when he returned to her, "but there has been a breakdown on the line, and we cannot go on until to-morrow."

"What shall we do, then?" and there was a little amused light in her candid eyes.

A twinkle came into his own. "Well, it sounds rather unconventional, but we shall have to go up to the hotel for the night."

She gave a low, delicious laugh. "It makes one feel so delightfully in the wilds. How fortunate for me that there happened to be a pleasant companion taking the same journey! What should I have done all alone?"

He was pleased that she took the predicament so sensibly, for just at first he had been afraid she would be vexed. Of course no one who had travelled at all would have thought twice about it; but she belonged so entirely to the old-world, modest, retiring school, that he could not tell in what light it would strike her. When he found she was not only sensibly reconciled, but even inclined to be light-hearted about it, he felt a sudden quickening of his pulses. It meant one more day, at any rate, and one that might be the best of all. That it might also add to the following regret did not trouble him. He would have to be satisfied with a memory, anyhow. Why not let the memory be the best procurable? Most good things had to be paid for pretty heavily. Well, he would take his good thing and pay.

"We shall be able to go out to the Matoppos and see Rhodes' grave," he said, with a scarcely veiled satisfaction in his voice. "We can do it in a day by motor. We will go up to the 'Grand' and get breakfast, and then start at once."

At the hotel he carefully booked their rooms when she was out of hearing, knowing perfectly well there would be something said about a double room, and probably all their luggage carefully deposited together, and he had no intention that she should suffer the slightest embarrassment that he could save her. Then they had a hearty breakfast

together, a motor veil was foraged out and they started away over the dusty roads, through the bare, treeless country of Matabeleland to the World's View.

When they stood together beside the flat massive slab, with its simple inscription, lying in such sublime grandeur of isolation, amid the great silences of the everlasting hills, both were silent for some moments. Then Evelyn spoke, and in her face there was a wistfulness, and a light of yearning.

"It is magnificent," she breathed—"the whole idea is colossal. What monument could he have had anywhere so fitting as these wide-spreading silences and blue vistas of Rhodesian kopjes? You, if you love your adopted country, must be rather proud of this . . ." and from the glorious prospect with its massive slab, whose silent eloquence was as the beating of Rhodesia's heart, she looked into his eyes.

"I do love my adopted country," he answered simply. "and I am proud . . . of *this*."

"Oh! I hope I shall love it." Her eyes roved round with a yearning deepening. "It is to be my adopted country also, but somehow I have less confidence in the future than when I left England."

Something in her voice that was a little pitiful moved him strangely; something, also, in her almost childlike confidence. It was the first time that she had even hinted at any change in the hopefulness of her outlook, and he was touched that she should do so now with such simple directness. Yet, for all his well-wishing, he could find no word of encouragement that seemed not too pitifully trite and commonplace; and, with all his pulses leaping

attfully, he only stood looking to the horizon, as ever, silent.

As if she hardly expected him to reply, she went on: "I think this is a memory that will help a little. I shall like to think of this lonely grave in its magnificence of simplicity; like a precious stone in the rugged setting of the country he founded and loved. One feels here as if the land claimed him, and as if all these kopjes were keeping watch about his tomb as a voluntary office of love. It doesn't seem to matter here what has been said to smirch his memory. It doesn't seem to matter what he was in any other thing. Here the kopjes themselves are testimony to his greatness in founding Rhodesia, and to all that he did to give her peace and prosperity afterwards."

"I am glad to hear you say that: there are so many people anxious to rob us of our great men. The personality of Cecil Rhodes, and his greatness, are written in the enduring language of a rich and grateful country, and one feels that is surely enough, without looking for weaknesses in other directions."

"You think it is a rich country?" she questioned a little curiously.

"I know it is," with quiet directness; "it is rich in minerals and in agricultural possibilities; it is a land of infinite promise if it is but allowed a fair fighting chance to develop steadily. I think the very drawbacks and disasters she has already weathered prove that her intrinsic value and staying power are immense and promise greatly for the future, if she can but escape the damning ills of mismanagement through the wrong men being in

power." He looked round a little sadly. "There is so much real manhood here—so much solid grit, but it could but be reached and welded by a great leader. But at present we stand badly in need of our great man. There are plenty of capable, clever men, but we seem to wait vainly for the really great one who can steer our ship safely through the shoals and quicksands, to a secure haven of self-governing prosperity. At present we are dangerously like the country that is proverbially foredoomed, because it is divided against itself. But the great man may yet come in time. I hope so. I love Rhodesia, and it hurts to see her sometimes like a helmsless ship, drifting this way and that—not quite sure where to put her faith, tired of fine words and fair promises that are fruitless flowers—tired of the machinations of individuals seeking their own aggrandizement and gain—tired of being the hunting-ground of over-capitalized companies and get-rich-quick company promoters—tired of the uncomfortable sense that she is often regarded, even by those who direct her destiny, as a sort of far-off detail; yet perfectly aware she is not yet ready to take the reins of government into her own hands, and equally convinced she has no desire towards Crown Colony government."

He paused, still looking steadily to the horizon, and Evelyn noted with surprise that, instead of his usual half-mocking, half-careless air, there was a look of intense earnestness mingled with an indefinable expression of power. And she felt suddenly conscious that, in speaking to her thus seriously of something that was evidently of deep interest to him, he had paid her a very real com-

pliment. In a tangled sort of way she felt grateful, and glad, and sad, all together, but almost afraid to speak lest she should change his mood. It changed, however, of itself. With a slight curl of his lips, and a sudden half-mocking tone, he concluded: "But if we are more or less like a troublesome child to our legal owners and the Imperial Government, there is not much doubt we present a desirable aspect to our neighbour, the Transvaal. Sooner or later, I daresay, a little secret negotiation will be in progress, and a little money will be handed across the counter to the urbane, magnanimous seller, who only, of course, wants the 'little creature's good.' And the buyer will go away with something carefully stowed in his keeping and the 'little creature,' who was just beginning to feel its feet comfortably, will find itself thrust back into nonentity, to be absorbed entirely into more powerful and overshadowing personalities. It is well granite lasts for ever. There may, eventually, be not much left of the original Rhodesia, except this slab in its lonely state, testifying to a personality which even Transvaal gold and South African Unions cannot rob us of."

They were very quiet on their homeward journey, with the confiding quietness of their afternoons on the ship when neither wished to talk. Evelyn was thinking of her own future, and dreaming some of her old dreams of usefulness and influence. The spirit of Cecil Rhodes seemed to have spoken to her spirit, and she wondered a little longingly if in the new life ahead of her even she might achieve something for his beloved Rhodesia.

She let her mind dwell on the thought. She encouraged it to hover round and over her, gazing with dreamy eyes at the surrounding country, and telling herself she loved it already. She perhaps hardly knew why she did this, or at any rate did not stop to probe. And if in the background of her mind there was a mental effort to crowd out a forbidden subject that tried to enter and fill its every corner, she did not allow herself to consider it. The alluring vision of what that future might have been, companioned by her new friend, was the thought she dare not admit, and the thought she wove dreams fantasies purposely to crowd out.

And for him! . . . well—was he not always silent?—was he not known among all the circle of his friends and acquaintances as the Silent Rancher? If the silence, as they sped back to Bulwago, was fraught with a wholly new burden of longing and vain regret; if the quiet eyes, looking to the far horizon of the land he loved, saw a shadow where there had been no shadow before—an emptiness where there had been fullness and rich content—bareness and desolation where there had been beauty and growing things—and a future which might never hold fulfilment in its richest sense—what was that to anyone but himself? Henceforward, behind the silence there would be a woman's face with clear, calm eyes such as strong men love—but that was his affair.

As they approached the hotel, she broke the silence.

"It has been delightful," she said in a low voice.

"I am sorry it is over."

"I am sorry also," was the poor little phrase

in reply, that had to do duty for all that hidden tumult of aching and longing.

But at dinner he again exerted himself to interest her, and for a little while they were almost gay. Afterwards they sat on the verandah and watched the stars, and as the hotel was somewhat empty, they had it to themselves. And it was then, for some reason he hardly knew, that he led the conversation to himself. He told her how he had chosen a Colonial ranching life, in preference to the military one he might have had, because it gave a wider scope to individuality, and because he loved freedom.

"And now I love my animals," he went on. "I hate to be away from the ranch and feel they are left to someone else's care. Most of them know me perfectly well. They run to meet me, and rub up against me, and feed out of my hand. I think these small Colonial cattle are more tame than any English breeds, and it makes them very lovable."

She made a sympathetic response, hoping he would go on, and feeling in the darkness that some motive lay ahead. It was so altogether extraordinary for him to talk of himself, even in their friendliest hours.

"And then, of course, there is the shooting. I get some excellent sport with lions, which hang round after the cattle, and I have had leopards on my verandah, while all manner of big buck are to be found on the ranch."

"And does it never seem rather a stunted, monotonous life?"

"Never for a man. To me it is full of interest from morning till night. But," and he looked hard

at the stars, "it is not the sort of life one could ask a woman to share—at least. from my point of view, not the sort of woman one would care to marry. Not that it makes any difference to me, because, when I decided to take it up. I also decided to leave matrimony out of my future schemes until, if ever, I could afford to retire to England. But this question of marriage seems to me at present to be one of the great drawbacks to the country. I hardly know why it is, but in Rhodesia, the outlying districts do not seem to suit a gentlewoman, in the way they do in Canada and Australia. It may have something to do with the climate. It probably has. Also the distance from home, and a certain cliqueness and rivalry among the people, which is a great disadvantage to a young country.

"The most satisfactory marriages I have seen out here, among the ranchers and farmers, are where the man has married a Colonial *Hausfrau* type of girl, who has been accustomed to the loneliness all her life.

"The English girl does not naturalize very well. She suffers terribly from home-sickness and the absence of companionship, and generally ends by spending a great deal of time in England. She gets fever, and depression follows, and there is practically no relief. When she badly needs a change of air and scene for a little while she cannot get it. The country is too young. There is nowhere to go, except to the coast, which costs far more than many can afford. The perfectly natural result is that she very often gets hopelessly bored with everything, her husband included, while he

is worried to know what to do with her. It is a subject upon which, I think, I have very decided opinions. A man has no right to expect a clever, interesting woman to be satisfied with his companionship only. It is not natural that she should be. Taking humanity in the aggregate, it is extremely unnatural. Therefore, if he knows it is likely to be all he can offer her, he ought not to speak."

From far back in the shadow, she asked, with a little touch of amusement that was purposely to mislead him—"Might not the poor lady even have a chance of deciding for herself?"

"No. The man knows what the life is likely to be. The woman does not. There is a certain glamour that can easily mislead her because of her ignorance and also, a great many women do not probe very deep into the future when it is a question of a home and a husband. The man has seen other failures to guide him—failures which have always fallen the hardest upon the woman; therefore he ought to run no risk."

"But they do? . . ." still with that little touch of amusement.

"Oh! yes, they do," half lightly. "Boredom and disillusion follow boredom and disillusion, and still everyone is quite sure his case will be the exception."

"Except the Silent Rancher? . . ."

"How do you know I am called that?"

"I think I guessed."

From her shadow she was looking hard into his face, once more with that old unacknowledged wish

to remember it clearly, but he did not turn his eyes to her, nor cease from studying the stars.

"Except the Silent Rancher," he echoed, in the same half-bantering tone—"fortunately for any woman who might have dared the experiment. Just imagine being stranded in a Rhodesian wilderness with only one man for a companion, and that, one who would forget to talk, forget to be polite, perhaps even forget that she was there! Appalling— isn't it!"

In the shadow her eyes were very soft, roving over the fine head, the fine face, the strong, pensive mouth, the quiet eyes with their swift, alluring expressions. Of a truth, some men's silence might be infinitely better than another man's gaiety. A sudden little sprite moved her.

"You are not always silent, after all. You have been quite gay coming up from Cape Town."

"Ah, that was my companion," gallantly. He stood up and moved to the edge of the verandah. "For what it is worth, you may claim a signal victory," glancing round to her with a bantering light in his eyes. "No woman in thirty-seven years has so inspired me to conversational prowess as you have. I am an anomaly to myself, and feel a little as if I had lost my bearings. It will be laid at your door for ever, if it proves a lingering phase and the pals who have grown to rely on a sure and certain quiet when they feel in need of it awake to the fact that they have been robbed of their refuge."

She smiled back at him, but she could not meet his glance. There was a gladness in her heart that might betray her in her eyes, if he saw them. In-

stead, she looked past him to the horizon, sitting very still: and a shaft of light from the drawing-room behind lit up her hair like a halo, and threw out her delicate features in cameo-like distinctness against the dark background of a projecting screen.

He caught his breath with a little sharp sigh, and gripped the rail of the verandah hard. It was coming over him again, that wild, sweet desire to hold her in his arms while there was yet time, and take away among his other memories the touch of her lips against his. One moment he wished that she would go, and the next that she would stay. One moment he questioned if she would be indignantly angry and offended, and the next he told himself, since they had to part, it would not matter either way, and at least he would have his memory. Then across his mind flashed an argument he had heard from one of his sisters, that had rather struck him at the time.

She had been denouncing a man against another sister's cynical defence. "I don't care," she had finished defiantly. "A kiss is a little enough thing to most men, but it is not to most women. A man ought to be able to tell at a glance which woman will laugh and forget, as he will, and which will remember all her life. He ought to know that to some women forgetfulness is possible when it has to be, if there has been no word or touch or sign of love: whereas, a kiss may endanger her peace of mind for ever."

And remembering, it came to him, that this fair-haired, calm-eyed girl was of those who would never forget. He would never forget himself: but that was different. He owed it to everything no

held manly, since they had to part, that no act of his should recklessly awaken a useless, irremediable pain.

"I suppose it is about closing time," he said simply, and she flashed a little in the shadow that the signal for parting should have come from him.

All through the following day he was again the half-mocking, half casual friend, and she wondered a little painfully if he would even remember her when the journey was ended. Would he go straight off to his beloved ranch and dismiss her from his memory, or would he be interested to know how the future treated her?

As the light waned, and there was no return of the serious charm of the day before, she decided it would be dismissal and forgetfulness; and she wished a little passionately and unreasonably that they had never met.

But just before they said good-night for the last time, came one of those swift changes that alike startled and rejoiced her. He was lingering to see that she had everything comfortable for the night before leaving her, when suddenly he found himself looking full and deep into her eyes and saying, "Well, it is the end. Pity that all the things one really cares about end so quickly!"

Totally taken aback, she stammered unthinkingly, "You . . . you have cared? . . ."

"How should I do otherwise?" Was his voice rough, or was it merely hoarse?—was it mocking, or was it strained? . . . She felt only in some way utterly at a loss, it was so unlike anything it had yet been. Then almost as quickly he seemed to pull himself together.

"Dear little girl," he said, taking both her hands in his—and there was no mocking in his voice now only a swift sadness—"there are not many oases in the desert of life, and when they come we are apt to care overmuch, even though we have to hurry on and are not allowed to linger in 'the shade. We may or we may not meet again after to-night, but, at any rate, I may thank you now for one of the sweetest oases of all. It is good-night, and good-bye."

He bent his head with a sudden air of reverence, and kissed each hand in turn, as they lay unresistingly in his.

"Bless you!" he murmured, a trifle huskily, and left her.

Ivelyn sank down and covered her face with her hands, and in the dim light tears forced their way through her fingers.

Then, afraid to question ever her own heart, she pressed her lips against the spot on each hand where his had touched. In a little tired voice she whispered to herself—"I'm glad I knew you, you dear Silent Rancher. If the future is destined to be full of falling dreams and broken illusions, I shall at least have known a Man. I shall have known a Knight of Old Time, who was in the flesh to-day."

XIV

OF A LIAR AND SOME OTHERS

GWENDOLEN LEVEN and the Hippo were standing together on the strip of sand which at Livingstone does duty for a platform, when the train steamed in at 8 o'clock.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Hippo, "here's the dear old Sphinx back again already!"—and then he shouted—"Hullo, Metcalfe! where have you sprung from? You haven't given us time to arrange any cattle-lifting at all!"

From the back of the compartment Evelyn looked with covert curiosity at the speaker's pleasant, boyish face, and at the woman with him. She saw a slight, elegant figure, in a cool-looking frock of palest green linen, and a large shady green linen hat, from which a filmy lace veil fell gracefully; whose beautiful dark eyes lit up gaily at sight of Ranger Metcalfe, while a bright smile displaying a row of perfect teeth, gave her suddenly an extraordinarily youthful appearance. Evelyn thought she had never seen anyone so charming in her life before; but the fact did not tend to weaken any of her carefully-built-up reserve. She remained in the train while Metcalfe swung himself down to the platform, and watched again while the three greeted each other, not with any effusion, but with unmistakable friendliness.

"I have brought your visitor," she heard him say. "She has helped me through a great many tedious hours."

And as he said it she felt a sudden sense of loneliness and loss. Of a truth it was the end. In a few minutes the familiar daily companion of three weeks would have passed out of sight, and she would be alone in a far country with strangers. Something of the forlorn feeling showed in her grave eyes, as she shook hands with Gwendolen and the secretary but she tried to smile with naturalness, while she told herself, a trifle unreasonably, she was sure she would not like this elegant woman, with her Parisian air in the wilderness.

While she was still thinking it, and while the secretary was engaged with her luggage and Gwendolen claimed a moment by a passing friend, she was suddenly aware that Metcalfe was standing beside her looking hard into her face, with a very kindly expression in his eyes, and a little joking twinkle.

"Don't look so forlorn," he rallied her, "and don't form any opinions in a hurry. Wait three days. I'm off now. Good bye."

The suddenness seemed to hurt her like a blow. There had scarcely been time to exchange half-a-dozen words since they parted last night, and now he was shaking hands like any casual acquaintance.

She wanted to thank him for all his thoughtfulness; to ask him to come and see her in Livingstone; to be invited to go and see him—but something in his manner seemed to numb her, and she

only shook hands and said "Good-bye." Then Gwendolen interposed—

"But surely you won't go out till this afternoon? Come up to Government House for lunch. Of course you must; H. H. will expect you."

"Thanks very much; but I am going out now at once. It will be so hot this afternoon."

Gwendolen raised her eyebrows in some slight surprise.

"Why such haste? Why not go out to-morrow morning? Surely you have brought us news from England?"

"Miss Harcourt will tell you the news. I cannot stay in to-day. Many thanks, all the same. Good-bye," and lifting his cap he moved away, with scarcely a glance at Evelyn. But there was still the Hippo.

"Hi! Hi! Metcalfe!" he called, "you can't go out to-day. We're expecting you at Government House. My dear chap, you must be mad. You needn't talk if you don't want to, but for Heaven's sake let us have the chance to gaze at you."

"I cannot confer even that privilege to-day," came back the laughing answer—"except upon my expectant cattle," and he strode away out of hearing.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said the Hippo. "What's taken the man?—haste in the Sphinx is unbecoming. He must be frightened at you, Miss Harcourt. Surely you haven't laid upon him the burden of conversing when you had him safely surrounded by deep water."

"Only at merciful intervals," she told him, as a

move was made for the Government House conveyance, which soon afterwards deposited them before the large, rambling bungalow, built on many pillars, and with its wonderful verandah, gay with flowering creepers, and cosy with large, deep chairs, dainty writing tables, book-stands, and squares of bright Turkey carpets here and there. Breakfast was awaiting them, and the Administrator himself came forward to greet them from his office, clad in cool white linen. Evelyn felt the novelty of everything, and tried to be interested; but the gap seemed to be growing every moment, and the absence of the familiar face more poignant. She was glad to go away at last to have a bath and rest in her room; but it was not until she felt thoroughly refreshed that she opened and read the long telegram awaiting her from that other Administrator in the north.

When she had read it, she put it slowly down and glanced at the reflection of the grave face in the mirror opposite to her. And it struck her that there was some subtle change since she started out on this memorable voyage. A cable had reached her the day before she left her old home, and with a pleasant sense of new importance she had eagerly devoured its contents. Now she read her message slowly, and grave eyes looked into grave eyes, asking unanswerable questions that might not even be put into words.

Among them was the lurking remembrance of the conversation she had loyally striven to forget, which yet flitted at times in the background of her memory, like a haunting spectre.

At lunch they told her Saturday was a sort of

"at home" day, and she would behold the youth and notables of Livingstone drinking tea and playing tennis in the Administrator's gardens.

"I hope the Liar will turn up to-day," Gwen-dolen remarked, "because it is really an entertainment gratis to listen to him, and so delightfully Rhodesian."

"And the more the merrier," added the Hippo. "Give me two or three first-class liars, who have been in the country a few years, and it would take a three-generation Yankee to best them."

"Of course he will come," from the Administrator; "he would not be likely to miss such a chance of airing some of the old lies. If he can but lure Miss Harcourt out of earshot of the rest of us, he will be in a seventh heaven."

"Take my tip, and appear to believe everything," put in Wynyard Leven. "His explanations are infinitely worse than his lies."

"To go one better each time is the most amusing," said the Hippo. "Berridge was very funny at the club yesterday. He was in one of his driest moods, and Beene was yarning away as usual. Presently he told us about a baboon fore-looper he had when he was farming in the O. R. C. He was describing how it ran along the backs of the oxen, and bit their ears or their tails to make them go, when Berridge, as solemn as a judge, said—'Good story, that. It reminds me of when I was trekking up here in the early days. There were a lot of lions about, and one night, while we were asleep, three of them killed three of our oxen, and ate them. The next morning we started before daybreak and after a little we wondered why we

were going so much faster than usual. When it grew light, we discovered we had inspired the three lions. By Jove!" he finished. "those lions could pull . . ." and the Hippo chuckled hugely at the reminiscence.

After lunch they all retired for the usual siesta, re-appearing at four o'clock; and Evelyn rejoined with interest the general animation and air of gaiety that now superseded the hot, jaded, sleepy hours of the noontide.

Gwendolen Leven, elegant and distinguished as ever, was waiting for her on the top of the verandah steps, and down below them was a scene almost Eastern in its brightness of coloring. Two large wicker chairs, lined with scarlet, stood about amid brilliant flower beds. Men in spotless white linen and white sun helmets stood talking in twos and threes. The native servants, in their long white kanzas and daintily embroidered white caps and gorgeous scarlet zocaves, gold embroidered, fitted among the groups. Overhead was a sky of intensest African blue. The only thing missed was fluttering skirts and gay parasols, and these were indeed conspicuous by their absence, in a commality consisting chiefly of men.

They went down the steps together, and Evelyn found herself once again the cynosure of every eye, as was, indeed, likely to be the case, seeing speculation had been rife, ever since the engagement was announced, as to what manner of woman was to marry a man so universally disliked by other men as General Mahon.

Surprise was just as certainly the predominant note, varied with an occasional cynical gesture or

content from those who held the theory that any woman would sell herself for power and place. Yet, even for them, there was a frankness and candour about Evelyn's eyes, and a charm in her ready smile, that of itself belied their theory, and left them puzzled.

She, for her part, entirely unconscious of the controversy she aroused, had a pleasant smile for all and was genuinely interested in this, her first glimpse of Rhodesian society. It was, in the first place, a great novelty to a girl who had spent all her life in an English village to see any gathering where the predominant sex was masculine. That that sex should be further represented by so many interesting, good-looking, manly fellows added to the charm of the novelty, and helped her for a little while to forget the swift sense of desolation of the morning.

She liked the tall, youthful Administrator with his blunt, outspoken manner and his charming smile. She liked the two tall doctors, with their genial chaff and gaiety while they were free of fever-stricken patients. She liked the grave-faced Native Commissioner, and the clever-faced Secretary to Native Affairs, and all the manifold rank and file of civil servants, conspicuous among whom were the smart soldierly officers of the Barotse Native Police. The doctors were delighting a small group, containing Gwendolen, her husband and the Hippo, with an account of how their respective houseboys had been discovered to have gone to a nigger festivity over-night in their masters' dress clothes, and how punishment had been summarily dealt out to them in the most satisfying

manner to the outraged owners of the dress clothes. Then a gay young commissioner from an outside district related how he went out one night after lions, not intending to return until morning; and how he changed his mind, and went home at two o'clock, to find his cook boy and his house-boy cuddled up together in his bed: when more summary punishment was, of course, meted out in a satisfying manner. Then a thin-faced, clean-shaven, peculiar-looking man with restless grey eyes commenced grandiloquently—"Eh . . . speaking of lions. . . ." Instantly a sort of telepathic communication went round the group, and the Hippo murmured to Evelyn—"Behold our Champion Liar!"

"Yes . . . speaking of lions . . ." echoed Gwendolen. "do go on, Mr. Beene: your lion stories are always so thrilling."

"Oh, it was a mere trifle occurred to me. I don't think I ever told you about the time I was lion-shooting when I woke up suddenly to hear a lion purring loudly just outside my tent."

"Serenading you, so to speak. . . ." suggested one of the doctors. "Or hushing you to sleep! . . ." murmured Weyward Leven. "Was it beating time with its tail? . . ." asked the Hippo frivolously.

Disdaining to notice them, the liar proceeded—"I looked out through the flap and hurled my shoe where I thought its head might be. . . ."

"Just for all the world as if it was a mere cat. . . ." breathed the Hippo.

"There was no sound, so I just fired off my gun at a black object. . . ."

"I hope you didn't hit your shoe?" Gwendolen asked, with quick concern.

"I don't think I hit anything, but the purring ceased and I was able to get to sleep. Presently, however, I was awakened with a start by something struggling with my bath. I sat up in bed, just in time to see the lion triumphantly carry my bath out through the opening. . . ." He was interrupted by a general titter, and one of the doctors asked wickedly, "Did he take any soap?"

The Liar turned to Evelyn with a hurt air. "I assure you it is perfectly true, Miss Harcourt. That lion carried the bath outside the tent. I jumped up and let fly at him. The bullet struck the bath, and knocked out two of the lion's teeth, but the brute himself got away."

Evelyn's eyes, though smiling, looked sympathetic, and the Liar seized his opportunity, again ignoring the murmured asides. "Most extraordinary things happen in this country," he ran on, contriving to draw her a little away from the laughing group. "Really, it is almost impossible for anyone but an eye-witness to believe them."

"You have had a great deal of experience?" she suggested, willing to be amused. "I? Oh, yes," in a casual, off-hand way, "I suppose, roughly, about a hundred lions and perhaps fifty elephants have fallen to my gun in the last two or three years."

"Wonderful!" she murmured in a becomingly awe-struck voice, and smiled inwardly as she remembered the Hippo's summing up, "Half a

dozen lions with trap-guns and one wounded elephant that could not get away, is about the extent of his big-game shooting in fifteen years."

"Of course I have had many hairbreadth escapes," he went on modestly. "I really think I may be said to bear a charmed life. Why, only the other day, I had a most marvellous escape even here. I was in a canoe down by the Falls, fishing, when presently we began to rock up and down in the most extraordinary manner, at the same time moving nearer to the edge of the chasm. And what do you think it was? An enormous hippopotamus had dived, and come up under our canoe, and it was just heaving us up and down in play, purposely carrying us towards the edge of the precipice."

"But how dreadful!" Evelyn breathed rather taken aback. "What did you do?"

"We contrived to scramble on to an island; but it was a very narrow escape."

Evelyn wondered inwardly if she would dare to go on the Zambesi at all, when Gwendolen who had been loitering near with the Hippo, remarked, "But have you heard of my experience, Mr. Beene? It is really far more remarkable than yours. You know we were picnicking on Palm Island last week, and Mrs. Fraser and I were getting tea ready while the others fished. We arranged our cloth on a large mound, and had spread everything out, when to our consternation the mound began to move. We were too horror struck to do anything but stand like two dummies, with our mouths and eyes wide open, while the mound developed into an enormous hippo., with our tea-cloth on his back,

and the tea-cups and cakes and plates falling round him in all directions."

A splutter from the Hippo in the background rather spoilt the end of the story, but he was quickly composed again and joined the others, remarking—

"But have you told Beene about our experiment with the chameleon, Mrs. Leven? An extraordinary thing, Beene! We got an extra fine one. I never saw a chameleon deport himself better. He almost seemed to anticipate our wishes. We put him on a red cushion, and a blue cushion, and a green cushion, and you couldn't see he was there. The end was a tragedy, though—poor old chap! We put him on a Scotch plaid—and he bust!"

The Liar looked as black as thunder, and the Hippo added gleefully—"Come along and play tennis, Miss Harcourt. I see they have just finished a sett."

Evelyn went off gladly enough with the light-hearted Hippo, and the Liar spun no more yarns to her sympathetic ears that day.

Later they had a merry dinner on the big, cool verandah, when Wynyard Leven and the Hippo seemed to be vying with each other in boyish frivolity, which Gwendolen encouraged rather than suppressed with light satire, because it amused the Administrator and drove some of the weariness from his tired, white face.

After dinner, as it was a beautiful moonlight night, they telephoned to the two doctors to come and join them in an excursion on the Zambesi, and very shortly afterwards were all trolleying down through moonlight forest glades to the water-

side, where, blissfully indifferent to perils of hippopotami and crocodiles, they glided about in the moonlight while Gwendolen sang to them, with her guitar. Evelyn enjoyed the excursion immensely, in spite of the fact that she was keeping a nervous and persistent look-out for monsters with one eye, while with the other she drank in the loveliness of the wide-sweeping, moonlit waters, and the tall, feathery palms under the wonderful star-spangled heavens. They showed her the soft, filmy cloud in the distance, hanging low over the shimmering river—the soft, filmy cloud of which Gwendolen said:

“We look to that filmy haze as the Mahomedans look towards Mecca. At the Falls we have our shrine and altar, our cathedral naves and holy of holies; and over it all, as a white cloud, broods the Spirit of the Waters.”

Evelyn's blue eyes looked curiously into the dark eyes of the speaker, as one who was yet weighing her in the balance and reserving judgment. She seemed unconsciously to say, “How much of you rings true? How much is mere effect?”

Then she wondered with a fresh longing where, under this star-spangled sky, was the friend of her journey—the whimsical, winsome personality of him they called “the Silent Rancher”?

Before she went to sleep, she decided that these dwellers in the wilderness were a pleasing, charming group, who knew how to make the very best of whatever offered as a break to the inevitable trials of wilderness existence. And it occurred to her dimly that it was perhaps on such outposts of

civilization one must look for the best of grit and manhood, rather than in the little quiet villages and small provincial towns of her short lived experience

Already, in but scarcely twenty four hours, she had gained a dim understanding of how, in the outposts, one may yet be nearer the actual beating heart of Life than in a secluded, prejudice bound village, in the very centre of the most civilized country in the world

Then came the forbidden thought :

If she had not spent all her life in that secluded, custom-ridden, hide bound atmosphere of conventionality and inexperience, would she ever have seen what she had seen in that smooth spoken soldier and Administrator who came into her uneventful life from the other side of the seclusion and won her allegiance and her admiration undeterred by rivals, and strengthened by her ignorance?

But in any case, what of it now? Inexperienced and ignorant concerning many things, she might be, but at least she could be true to her word and loyal to her promise, and brave enough never to show by act or word if awakening had come too late.

THE SILENT RANCHER

XX

THE SILENT RANCHER IS I SEP 20 1907

A whole week passed and no word came from the
of Ranger Metcalfe. The Lippo accused Evelyn
chaffingly with having effectually frightened him
away, and while Evelyn received his chaff with a
spirit she was conscious of a cold growing between
at her heart, for the blank at his chosen side and for
the longing to know it all was well with him. She
thought if she could just see him once more to be
sure, and say good-bye. She would be glad to start
away to the north.

Something at Livingston was troubling her
finally. She did not know what, but she was
vaguely aware that there was something wrong
whenever any allusion was made to her engagement
or to her *fiancé*, an entire lack of enthusiasm
or even warmth, and that as she grew to know
those about her more intimately there was some-
times a sort of questioning, wondering expression
in their eyes. All her striving now seemed unable
to banish the remembrance of that fatal conver-
sation, arraighing her lover as most things that
were detestable.

Did some of these people, perhaps, think the
same? Had he enemies everywhere? How much
of it might have been truth? After all, what real
opportunity had she had of judging, seeing his

time in England had been so short, and his persuasions so insistent.

But in any case, she could only come back to the old starting-point when her promise was given. That, at any rate, was sure and certain, and must abide. Better, therefore, that it should be made absolute at once, and all her energies devoted to the carrying out of those dreams of hers which were to benefit all around her, and which might now further help her to banish from her thoughts, if not from her life, the bitter sweet remembrance of her journey. Meanwhile, if her efforts to develop a friendliness towards Gwendolen Leven were genuine, they were not successful. Recognizing with her clear judgment the elder woman's unmistakable beauty and charm, she was yet conscious of a barrier, born of she knew not what, that she could not bring herself to pass. Perhaps it was a little the wideness of difference between their separate lives in the past.

Gwendolen was of a world that Evelyn only knew by hearsay—a world where it was old-fashioned to be serious, and where most things were treated with a levity, and seeming heartlessness, which, though often unmistakably clever, perplexed and rather shocked the girl who was only as yet on the very threshold of the life of the senses and of real individuality. Habit and surroundings had prevented her venturing into any side paths, where she might have developed in a less stunted manner, and to hear things which she viewed afar off, and diffidently at that, casually introduced as perfectly natural topics, gave her a confused sense of being out of her depth, and un-

comfortably simple and out-of-date. Yet, with unconscious egoism, she entirely approved Uwell-dolen's independent attitude towards herself. Certainly, from the moment of her arrival, it could never be said this exiled *diçore'e* was not a step out of her way to curry favour with the noble Lady Mahon. Always she was only and absolutely herself. She assumed no guise of hostess, nor in any measure took for granted they must be friends. In her manner, and in all she did, she implied they were but two independent guests chancing to meet under the same hospitable roof, and under no obligation whatever to observe other than conventional interest and friendliness. The Administrator was her host, and the secretary in his name looked after her welfare, and arranged such entertainment as he thought she might enjoy. Thus, with her opening mind and widening experience, Evelyn was able to perceive quietly, and learn a little from the other woman's perfect self-possession, her dignity which was yet not dignity, as much as the trained and graceful ease of the high-bred gentlewoman; her piquant originality, and her fearless, engaging attitude of independence. She understood quickly and it was no small surprise to her, that her own attitude towards this other guest was of practically no moment to her whatever. What she had done she had done, and having accomplished it, she was strong enough to dispense with outside criticism, and mould her life accordingly. To Evelyn this in itself was a revelation. It was all revelation. But it was education also, and she began to see dimly that there might be other standards and other judgment

bars beside her own. Yet it was perfectly natural that she should continue to withhold her friendship, and allow it to remain apparent that they were at present but mutual guests under one roof. It was her nature to be cautious as well as honest, and until she saw reason to let go her prejudices, she could not entirely help herself holding on to them, and remembering always that they were there.

Gwendolen, with her varied experience and wide knowledge, understood the girl even better than Evelyn understood herself, and instead of attempting to break down barriers and force issues, she went through her days as usual, making her own plans, sometimes laughing gaily, sometimes sewing silently, tending her beloved flowers, chatting to the many passing and re-passing officials, in a way that made Evelyn feel far more at home than any conventional entertaining could possibly have done.

But to her husband she confided casually that she did not think the girl was happy, and she hoped they might yet be friends before she started north. To herself, in thoughts that required no words, she noted the fact that Ranger Metcalfe stayed rigidly away from the companion who had helped him pass many hours on the ship, and that that same companion rather strangely refrained from any mention of his name.

This was the state of affairs when her husband sought her one morning with the news that Metcalfe wanted her and himself to meet him at the river for tea, without mentioning it before the others.

"He wants to see you about something pri-

vately," he told her. "I promised I would manage to arrange it."

Gwendolen acquiesced without asking questions, though with considerable curiosity, and, about ten days after Evelyn's arrival, she and her husband went off for an afternoon on the river together, while Evelyn played golf. When she saw Ranger Metcalfe on the bank awaiting them, it struck her that in some way he had aged. He did not look different, and his manner in greeting them was just the same quiet, unaffected manner of old, but there was something new in his eyes, somewhere in their grey, quiet depths, the shadow of a lurking trouble, enhanced by a slightly worn look as of one who has been sleeping ill.

Indeed, they had been a weary, restless ten days, before they culminated in so definite an action as this request for a private interview with Gwendolen Leven. At first he had thought that, once among his beloved cattle and his old mares, he could quickly regain his philosophical composure and relegate his memory to such times that he might safely allow himself to indulge it. He had no intention of trying to forget. At present he had no wish to forget. With all the hunger and the longing, life yet possessed some new richness which he had no desire to forgo.

And if Evelyn's approaching marriage had been one he could contemplate satisfactorily for her sake, he was no doubt strong enough to go on steadily in the path he had mapped out. But instead of philosophical composure, instead of a well-regulated, carefully restrained memory, he found that his own hunger and ache began swiftly,

and with alarming force, to merge itself into a continuous, blind protest. At all hours of the day, in busy moments or in leisure, when lying down or when rising up, the thought would come to him like a sudden blow—"She is going to marry Mahon."

In the night it made him writhe helplessly, and drove sleep away altogether, except in occasional intervals of exhaustion. Finally the sentence reconstructed itself into "She must not marry Mahon in ignorance." The fact that he could not hope to marry her himself—or thought he could not—in no way redeemed him from the obligation of a friendship which was admittedly deep and strong.

Because he knew Mahon, and because he knew her, at the end of those dreadful, soul-racking days he knew that he owed it to her to put enlightenment in her way, before it was too late. After all, who had she in that distant land beside himself? Because he was prevented by his very love itself from acting personally, was he to do nothing? Was he to stand aside and watch her walk in ignorance to what he could only feel would be her doom. No, a thousand times no. As her friend, she could claim more than that of him, whether she ever knew his part in the matter or not.

Under a shady palm-tree, with the joyous river hurrying past them on its great quest, and while her husband fished from the boat, Gwendolen very quickly grasped all that was involved in the few direct sentences, so typical of the man, in which he broached the delicate subject. From her vantage-

ground a little behind him, she looked hard at his grave, resolute face, the steady eyes. She unwaveringly watched the hurrying river. A question trembled on her lips, a question that she dared not ask her to admit everything, and she did not know whether to put it. She did not know, with such a man as he, how far even her privileged friend should intrude. With his daring intuition he understood. After a slight pause, he turned his head very quietly and looked straight into her eyes. "I think you are wondering why I let myself take such a personal interest in the matter. It is easily explained. Under happier circumstances, and with a suitable home to offer, I would have moved heaven and earth to win Miss Harcourt for my wife."

"Ah! . . ." and in her turn, Gwendolen looked hard at the river. There was an expression in her eyes that she could not entirely hide. She was thinking that if she were Miss Harcourt, she had her Gwendolen Tever's, even if she were she, she would throw most men over the board. Ranger Metcalfe.

Then, because, in spite of her antagonism, she liked Evelyn, she remarked: "I should not have taken you for a man to be moulded by circumstances. In strong hands, circumstances can be very plastic."

"Perhaps it is not possible for you to see things in quite the same light that I do. There are always so many different points of view. Even if she were not pledged to another, I could not ask her to share my life on the ranch. It is not a suitable life for . . . for anyone like Miss Harcourt."

Gwendolen got up and walked to the water's edge and stood a moment looking into the cool depths. Across, on the opposite bank, was a wealth of loveliest foliage. Beyond, in the far distance, were mystical blue hills. All around was that sense of unreal intensity, to the dweller of cities who finds herself surrounded by untrodden country where lurk the beasts of prey. To her vivid imagination there was a kind of passionate allurements about the whole scene with its wealth of sunshine, its vigorous flashing river, its unruly, luxuriant riot of growing things, its warm, luscious atmosphere. She felt in her blood that it was a country for strong, elemental passions; for doing and daring for having and holding, at the sword's point if necessary; but, never, never, for calm, prosaic, latter-day reasoning.

She turned to him with a little low laugh, and a swift gleam in her eyes. "Do you know what I would do if I were you? I would entice her down here—here to this very spot—and I would have my horse waiting; and before she quite realized anything I would have her up on my saddle-bow, and *ride—ride*—I would never draw rein until I lifted her down at the door of my little wattle-and-daub home on the ranch, and then. . . . Oh! then I would show her it was better to stay even there with me, than to have comforts and luxuries with anyone else."

She saw him clench his hands suddenly, and she felt instinctively that he was biting his teeth together hard, but otherwise he betrayed no sign of his feelings. In reply, he gave a low laugh, and looked into her eyes with a whimsical expression.

"That is what I might do if it were Geraldine herself, but not with Evelyn Harcourt. She is not yet awake."

"And am I so very wide awake?" with a little smile.

"You are a woman. She—from some point of view—is still a child."

"And are you afraid to awaken her?"

"I should be afraid to do so roughly."

"Ah!" with a little impatient gesture—"Does my man ever understand a woman?"

There was a slight pause, then she asked, "Then all you want me to do is to try and tell her Sir Henry Mabon's true character?"

"Yes."

"And if I do, are you confident she will act any differently?"

"No, but I am certain she has a right to know more than she does at present."

"It will be very difficult. We are scarcely friends. She still mistrusts me."

"If I know her at all, I think she is merely waiting to know you better."

"And to overcome a very deeply rooted prejudice?"

"If so, you cannot blame her so much as her narrow experience."

"Well, I will try; but do not expect too much. I can see perfectly that the prejudice is very deep-rooted, and she may resent my even approaching such a subject. Frankly, I have small hope of success."

He looked troubled, but could only thank her and hope for the best.

Gwendolen was very quiet as she and her husband trolleyed slowly back through the approaching gloom to Government House. Behind them, over the river, the sun was setting in a splendour that had a dull, angry look about it. It might have been lit by the angry fires of a volcano, or it might be catching the glow of some earthquake destroyed city in flames, which the rising dust had turned a molten, menacing blood-red. It was like an eye of portent, and the very waters themselves seemed to stay their mad rush and go swiftly and silently beneath a blood-red pall. She shivered unaccountably, and was glad to feel her husband's arm steal round her and draw her close.

"What is it, little woman?" he said tenderly, and she nestled closer to the love that had been willing to lose the world for her. Up through the deepening shadows they went, and she was vaguely glad to leave that blood-red river behind. Surely, surely, something untoward was 'here—something in progress that chilled and numbed her senses.

She was right.

From the little bungalow on the north bank of the river, a woman had gone out *to kill*

XVI

BESIDE THE BANANA

BUT it is necessary to go back a little, and recall the conversation in the Administrator's garden when Gwendolen announced her intencion to Berridge, of paying a visit to the little bungalow by the Zambesi where dwelt the Conservator of the Falls, James McNair. She knew the Conservator personally, as he had been at Government House occasionally on business, but until the day of the thrilling rescue she had never seen his wife. Indeed, she had scarcely realized that he had one, as he never mentioned her, and if she considered the matter at all, she concluded he had followed the example of so many men in the Colonies, and married beneath him.

"Is there a Mrs. McNair?" she had asked her husband, after one of his visits.

"Yes, but I don't think anyone ever sees her."

"Why? Is she too realistic, or something, through living in that romantic little bungalow?"

"More likely unrepresentable."

"Doesn't anybody know her?"

"Oh, I expect so. Berridge goes there a good deal. There are two children."

"Well, I don't envy her her husband," he said comically. "I don't like the look of him."

"Not McNair?" in some surprise. "But he's quite a decent sort. His father is a Scotch parson."

"Perhaps that accounts for it."

"Accounts for what?"

"My antipathy. I admit his manners are excellent, and he does not drop his aitches, but his eyes are like cold steel, and he has a detestable mouth. No doubt his wife is appalling. He certainly looks the sort of man who would marry chiefly to save expense."

From the moment, however, that she had looked into the haunting sadness of Elaine's eyes, she had been uneasy. Although the eyes contained no appeal, no asking for sympathy, her instinct told her no mere girl could look so sad without some unusual cause. Much as she disliked the smooth-tongued, good-looking husband, Gwendolen decided she must try and get to know the sad-eyed wife. So she arranged to go down to the Zambesi on a particular afternoon, row to the bungalow, and be fetched later by Berridge, who would be fishing with her husband and the Hippo.

It was about four o'clock when the boys pushed off the little trolley, occupied by Gwendolen, plentifully surrounded by bright-coloured cushions, and with a large white umbrella. The trolley ran over the sand on little iron rails, and the way led down through a semi-tropical forest for about three miles to the broad strip of glistening silver which was the river.

Gwendolen was glad to be going down to the river. When she first came she cared for little but the Falls. Their wonder held her spell-bound.

For a while she had no eyes for anything else. Then she discovered that the noise tried her nerves, and there were moments when it became so unendurable she had to hurry away. After that she gave more thought to the sweeping, fathomless river, with its lovely islands, like emeralds in an exquisite setting of turquoise; its waving palms and swaying bananas; its long, sweeping deeps, hurrying, scurrying rapids, quiet back-waters, and difficult currents. So she came to see that in a land of monotony it possessed the very spirit of change. In the morning it was an entirely different river to the afternoon. At one time a sky-reflecting, restful, azure river, with lovely pictures of foliage and clouds on its bosom, and dim hills in the distance, dreaming sleepy dreams beneath a sleepy noonday sky. At another, a broad band of shining silver, beautiful in the distance, but too dazzling close at hand; though always with alluring green, shadowy nooks among the islands for those who were not afraid of hippopotami and crocodiles. At eventide perhaps a blood-red river almost terrible in its lurid richness of colouring, which vied with a sky that no artist would dare to paint. Or, perhaps, it was a mother-of-pearl sky, casting down upon the bosom of the waters tenderest shades of pink and mauve and green, which turned the waiting world into a fairyland, and decked the far-off spray from the mighty cascades at the Falls in the opalescent colours of a fairy's wing. Those were the times when, to Elaine McNair's rich imagination, there were spirits everywhere—a spirit of colour, a spirit of verdure, a river-god somewhere in state, dwelling in a

palace born of the radiance of creation's morning. To all the wilderness-dwellers the river was in very truth as a spirit—a spirit of light and hopefulness threading its cheery, invigorating way through a land that, without it, would be but a desert of sand. Without it the spot would be unendurable. With it, there were some who thought it the best spot in Rhodesia. Always when Gwendolen was feeling exhausted, the river revived her. From far-away sandy places, one looked for it with eager, searching eyes, as the night-watcher watches for the morning. Always, when visible, it sang its message of hope and gladness across the sun-scorched wilderness.

As Gwendolen rattled down on her little trolley, the boys singing a weird incantation as they ran, she thought it must be rather wonderful to live always beside so grand a river. She thought so still, as she stood waiting for the Thames punt belonging to Government House, in which four liveried, cheery niggers would paddle her to the Conservator's bungalow. Elaine McNair, on the contrary, was hardly thinking at all, as she sat alone in the shade of the big banana. It was one of the days when she was afraid to think; consequently when a charming apparition in white muslin came slowly towards her, she watched her in a dazed manner, having quite forgotten what Berridge had told her about Mrs. Leven's intention to call.

Gwendolen came slowly up to her, and the first thing she noticed was that Elaine's face was swollen and there was an ugly scar on her forehead.

Elaine was still gazing at her in aazed fascinated manner.

"What a heavenly spot!" Gwendolen began. "How you must love that banana!" Elaine's face glowed with pleasure. "I don't mind my walking into your garden in this unceremonious manner, but I thought you were so splendid in your dreadful adventure. I've wanted to know you ever since."

A little blush crept into Elaine's white cheeks, but she only murmured a half incoherent sentence about Mrs. Leven's kindness in coming. Gwendolen pretended not to notice her unresponsive manner, and chatted on about the river. In the meantime, without letting it be seen, she studied carefully the delicate sensitive face of her strangely baffling companion. And being gifted with understanding above the ordinary, she quickly saw that the stiff, almost repellent manner, was not born of a hard nature, but of long solitude, and restraint, and perhaps oppression. For some reason she could not have defined, her heart beat in sympathy. She looked into the patient eyes, like the eyes of a dumb animal in pain, and she told herself she had stumbled upon a hidden tragedy.

And because of it, she leaned back in her chair in a friendly, easy way, and put forth all her powers of attraction just as assiduously as, probably more so than, if she had been seeking to win the favour of a royal head. For Gwendolen knew a good deal about royal favours, and society's smiles, and if she had not been much wearied of both, she would not have stakeed all she had on Wynward Leven's love. And just as she had ever succeeded in society's charmed circle, so she now drew a warmer

flash to the wan face, and a little shy light of wonder and gratitude into the wide, elusive eyes. It was all Elaine could do as yet by way of response, so long and far had she strayed in the paths of restraint and solitude. But when Gwendolen Leven, with studied carelessness, drew a bow at a venture, she seemed to shrink back into herself like a frightened child.

"Have you hurt yourself, or have you neuralgia?" she asked. "Your face is swollen, and there is a scar on your forehead."

"I fell down," was the rather hurried answer, "and knocked my face while I . . . I . . . was trying to hang a picture."

"I'm so sorry. Have you anything to put on it? It's so funny to live without shops, isn't it; and perhaps you have no cream of any sort? If you could spare a boy to come back with me, I travel with a whole Cash Chemist's supply, and could certainly find something to do it good."

"Thank you, but it is nothing," in the same half-frightened manner. "I always mark so easily if I hurt myself."

Gwendolen saw it disturbed her to press the point, and asked, instead, if there was any chance of seeing the children.

"I hear them now," Elaine exclaimed, evidently relieved to change the subject, "they go nearly every day to see the engineer at the Power Station; he is devoted to them."

The two children appeared almost at once in charge of a piccanin not much bigger than themselves, and Gwendolen noticed, as she noticed most things, that the toddler, Billy, came towards them

as fast as his little legs would carry him, not saying a word, sticky sweetmeat; while Jamie lunged back to stuff his into his mouth, and stare at the boy. She saw in him the image of his father, and liked him at once; but Billy was so frightened and sweet she easily forgave a sticky little hand on her spotless frock, and hastened to encourage his happy ventures of friendship.

Elaine wiped the little grubby hands, and then sat silently watching, and Gwendolen amused herself with the children until she heard the sound of paddles, and knew Berridge was approaching.

Then she put the child off her lap, and stood up.

"May I come again? It's so delightful here by the river. I have enjoyed sitting in your garden so much."

"Ess, rum again," whispered Billy, with his hand still clutching her skirt. "Tommorow I'll go to my mummie. Daddy hurted mummie once in the mornin', an' mummie kried, an' me kried too, 'cos mummie bleded."

Gwendolen looked down at the solemn, pale little face, feeling she dare not look into the mother's.

"He is making it up," came in a low voice from a head bent down over his ears. "he is so fond of making up all sorts of tales."

"Daddy would kill you," came from the elder boy in severe tones to Billy—"he would kill you, and mother too, if he heard you say that."

A step behind made Gwendolen turn gladly to welcome her escort, and after Berridge had stayed a few minutes, she moved down to the edge of the river, where a canoe was waiting. Then they

glided away together, over a river the sunset had stained with lurid crimson and gold.

Berridge, as was his wont, asked no questions, and merely broke the silence with an occasional dry remark. Gwendolen sat very still beside him, and said nothing. Suddenly Berridge saw a big tear splash down on to her hand, and, taken aback, he glanced round into her face.

She gave a little twisted smile.

"They say there are special guardian angels for little children and drunkards, are there none, I wonder, for young, defenceless wives? . . ."

She saw him clench his hands with a passionate grip, and a strange, set look, as of fury that he dare not vent, came over his face.

"Guardian angels! . . ." with a bitter sneer, "are about as probable as the Fatherhood of God. The only thing one can easily believe is a fatherhood of the devil, and a following evil. James McNair is in possession of both."

"But surely, if he is really brutal, something can be done?"

"Not so far," and he ground his teeth. "She denies everything—from fear, I suppose, and because he dominates her absolutely."

Gwendolen shuddered. "It is horrible," she breathed—"horrible, and to be alone with him down there, so far from everyone. Something must be done if it is true. I must think."

"It's true enough," in a hard voice that hid his feeling, "but I am just waiting my time. Sooner or later I will make James McNair *pay*."

XVII

ELAINE MCNAIR'S TRAGEDY

AFTER Gwendolyn had left her, Elaine sat quite still, holding Billy in her arms, and watched the river.

They often sat thus at the sunset hour, when the child was tired of his play, while Jamie went off to the kitchen to pilfer things to eat and tattle over the black cook-boy.

"What a little lady, Elaine: will she run again?" he lisped, and nestled his fair head against her breast, sleepily. Elaine kissed the little curls softly—softly. Even in her mother's eyes she did not show any transports. The repression of her individuality had been too mercilessly complete. It was one of the crimes for which she was sometimes made to pay, if she showed a tenderness for the clinging, winsome baby-boy, which Jamie, or a refused if offered. She ought, of course, to have put him to bed at once; but, as so often, her dreamy, unpractical side tempted her, and she sat on. It was so beautiful in the calm of evening, watching the stars come out, and the moon grow brighter and brighter through the whispering banana. And then she wanted to think about Gwendolyn Leigh: it was so wonderful that anyone so radiantly lovely should have sought her out

because she wanted to know her—so wonderful to think of having a woman-friend at all. In all the starved existence of her married life, Elaine had never had a woman-friend. It had been entirely opposed to her husband's views, and he had effectually prevented it. She had never, as a matter of fact, had any friend at all except Arthur Berridge, and his friendship, if it was to be permitted to continue, had to appear to be entirely given to her husband. For her sake he spent considerable time with a man he hated, so that he might see her, and find occasional opportunities to help her. He could at least bring her fish that he had caught, and birds that he had shot, and the invigorating consciousness that there was someone who cared. Beyond that he dare not go, for her own sake, as he knew James McNair well enough to realize that one false step would certainly mean a tragedy. Also, he knew that she would never meet him half way. For the children's sake, if for no other, she would never take her release through him. Once when they had been alone for a little while one evening in the garden, and she was spent and white and exhausted after some terrible experience of the afternoon, he had blurted out in that abrupt way of his, "I'll take you away, if you'll come, little girl." He had not dared to draw near to her, or scarcely look at her, but his voice shook with an unusual emotion, and Elaine knew perfectly well that he meant what he said. But she only looked hard at the river with her big, big eyes, and murmured, "I could never leave Billy. He would be good enough to Jamie, but he would kill Billy by inches to torture me."

He had not dared to say any more, but as they moved towards the house, at the sound of an approaching step, he had breathed—"Remember, I will always take you if you will come. I shall not change. You have only to give me a signal. But if you won't come, I'll do anything in my power to help you, and you must always think of me as a friend you can rely on."

A little choking sob had been her answer, as she hurried to the children, and left him to stroll forward and greet her husband. That was three months ago, and the subject had never been broached again, but all the same a new memory lay between them like a link of shining gold. It was the memory of the first moments when he had clambered into the canoe, in its awful position on the precipice edge. He had caught her hands in his and held them fast, with feeling too deep for words. And she had looked into his eyes as never before, and for the first time he knew that if she dare let herself go, all her soul was his.

And still they had said nothing, neither then nor afterwards; but instead of letting his tortured feelings lure himself to seek forgetfulness in drink, in a way that made the Administrator condemn him as a hopeless drunkard, he had managed to keep straighter than he had been known to for some years.

Though he might not have acknowledged it, Gwendolen Leven's attitude had done a good deal towards helping him, in renewing his self-respect. He was perfectly aware that she would know of the last outburst, when he had so nearly lost his post; and that it was a climax to too many. And

though his nature would not permit him to be anything but abrupt and off-hand; his heart, as she had had the perspicacity to perceive, was sterling gold; and he had been so touched by her genial friendliness the afternoon he had been bidden to Government House, that he had sworn a solemn oath that for the sake of what he had seen in Elaine McNair's eyes, and for the sake of the trusting belief of this understanding woman, he would wrestle as he had never wrestled before against his besetting weakness.

And as he escorted her home after her visit to the little bungalow he was further fortified in his intention by that same frank friendliness in her manner. Without entirely realizing it, he felt what all men felt who had the opportunity to be on friendly terms with Gwendolen Leven—that because she knew a great deal about the evil in the world, she was capable of being kind to it, without condoning; and where most good people would think it their duty assiduously to condemn, she seemed to look ahead and unconsciously suggest by her attitude that it was worth while making a stand against it, and hating it for its own sake, independent of outside things. And when she said good-bye to him before Government House, he felt a rush of gratitude that it was a physical impossibility to him to show, when she said simply—"I am going to think. When I have thought hard, perhaps between us we may find a way yet to protect her."

And meanwhile at the little bungalow, James McNair strode across the garden with an expres-

sion in his very footsteps that made the mother and child tremble.

"What the devil are you doing out here at this hour?" was his greeting, and in the dim light she saw that his thin, white face was grey with suppressed fury. "Why isn't the child in bed! . . . you know he ought to be. Am I never to cure you of this cursed habit of mooning? Who has been here this afternoon? Jamie says a lady came. Who was she?"

Elaine stood up, still holding Billy, who clung to her in terrified silence.

"Mrs. Leven," she told him, in a low, frightened voice.

"Then take care she never comes again, or I'll make you sorry for it. Mrs. Leven indeed!—why, she's a divorced woman, damn her. I'm not going to have any of her sort hanging round my house. It was like her damned impertinence to come down uninvited after all this time. You ought to have known better than to receive her. You may be sure she only wants something," with an ugly sneer. "Clever women like her don't come and see little fools like you for nothing. But she's not to come any more, you understand. I won't have anyone prying into my domestic affairs. Now take the child to bed, and make haste."

She moved away silently, not daring to reply, but before she struck a light in the bedroom she held Billy close and kissed him several times. The child was too cowed to respond, except with a little whimper, which made her whisper hurriedly, in terror lest he should be heard, "Don't cry, darling. Mummie will take care of him."

Then in fear and trembling she put him to bed. For when her husband's face wore the expression she had seen this evening, she knew there might be far worse to follow. Something had evidently upset him in the afternoon, and if so, it was a natural consequence that he should come home and vent his fury on her. It was one way in which he kept his post, and contrived to blind outsiders to his real character; that and his smooth-tongued cleverness as long as he had himself under control. When his self-control was going, he came home to her. In his diabolical cleverness was a knowledge of himself so far-seeing that it had enabled him to blind people for five years concerning the conditions of his household. He knew perfectly well that he was subject to fits of demoniacal frenzy, in which he was scarcely answerable for his actions, but with the cunning of madness he controlled them, at any rate, to times when there were no spectators, and consequently no possible witness. A black boy's information would easily be met, and threats and cruelty had brought the helpless young wife to such a state of subjection she only dared to endure silently. More than once he had told her in cold blood that if she ever informed against him, he would kill her, and swing for it. "You're certainly not worth swinging for," had been the contemptuous rejoinder, "but as sure as my name is James McNair, that's what I'll do if you ever tell." And then he would go off to the club at Livingstone, and spin a few good yarns; or he would go and have a smoke with a pal, and make himself agreeable to his hostess in a quiet, engaging way; with the result that he was generally

voted rather a good fellow, who was a little to be pitied because he had married beneath him.

Only Berridge had any idea of the truth, and he, as he told Mrs. Leven, was waiting his time. It was the only thing he could do at present, without more circumstantial evidence, and for fear of only picking a quarrel which would prevent his giving the little help he was now able. The circumstances were not new to him, unfortunately. He knew that in South Africa there is a germ of irritability, and even brutality, which makes fiends of a certain type of man. He knew that in many places there were ill-treated wives, who tried to find a cold comfort in the fact that it was very much the order of the day, and they were probably no worse off than their neighbours. Few of them had anyone to appeal to but each other, and little enough assistance to obtain from that. It was in Johannesburg Elaine had first seen her husband in his true colours, and learnt only too quickly the uselessness of appeal among neighbours who were so many of them more or less in need of help themselves; and for the most part on a type who had never been accustomed to mix with a lower class. From there they had gone to an arid, lonely, isolated spot, where there were no neighbours at all, and she had been brought to her present state of terror-stricken subjection by the fatal absence of all possibility of rescue.

For, incredible as it may seem to those who have lived all their lives in an atmosphere of protection, it is only too terribly possible in the lonely places of the earth for a man of unbridled passions to ill-treat to the utmost limit of his bent the woman

who has left all her friends to go with him, if it happens that he is a tyrant and bully, and she has an unfortunate knack of irritating him, or is helpless and frail and timid. James McNair was a tyrant by nature, a tyrant by circumstances, and a tyrant by choice; and in any corner of the world only the God of the Defenceless could have saved a woman who was bound to him with the bonds of wifehood. It was to give his cruelty full play that he chose the lonely places, and carefully placed every possible obstacle between what neighbours there might be becoming friendly with his young wife. And yet he was a well-educated man, whose father was a clergyman of the Scotch Church, and through whose influence he obtained the post of Conservator of the Victoria Falls. Berridge's knowledge of him dated back to school-days, when he had been the most fiendish bully in the school and the terror of all the small boys. It had been renewed over a case of flagrant cruelty to natives in South Africa, when he had nearly come to grief, but been given the benefit of the doubt because he was a white man and apparently a gentleman.

Meanwhile, when little Billy was safely in bed, and she had tucked up Jamie, who had been attended by the nurse-piccanin, Elaine entered the sitting-room in fear and trepidation in answer to an angry summons from her husband. And directly she entered she knew that the "worse" was to follow.

"What does Jamie mean about Billy telling Mrs. Leven I hurt you? Can't you teach the child to hold his tongue? He's got to hold it, anyhow.

to the sofa, and she

sat in a chair, 'and'
ving headed it with
loggers and propped
nating dead at the

hours' meditation.
not move from that
he could cry, 'I shall
of the room, leav-

she hated the sight
to be in a room with

a loaded one. He knew that to be alone close to one fully loaded and cocked, pointing at her baby's head was a supreme refinement of torture, and he added to it the horror of a possible waking cry from the child.

He had no intention of firing at the child, she believed that, but what he certainly would do, if disobeyed, was to fire the gun from the room into the garden and perhaps frighten Billy out of his senses for good, or make him deaf for life. And he would do this if she moved, or if the child gave an unconscious cry.

After he had left her she sat like a corpse, with her eyes fixed vacantly on the moonlight flooded garden. She was trying not to think, for she felt that if she thought, she would go mad and leave Billy to the mercy of his father unprotected. She was also, in a feverish, helpless way, willing him to sleep peacefully. If he stirred, she broke into a very perspiration of fear, lest a cry should follow.

She was faint with hunger, and sick with fear, but a certain dogged resolve kept her rigid until the three dreadful hours were nearly over. Then a shaft of moonlight fell across the sleeping child, and she saw clearly his beautiful little head on the pillow with one little doubled fist beside it. And a new horror came to her of what might be his fate at his father's hands if she were to die and leave him. She sometimes felt so ill that it seemed as if she could not last long, and if it had not been for Billy, she would have been glad indeed; but the idea of his being left was torture.

And it was in that dreadful hour, watching his innocent sleeping face, with the deadly muzzle of

XVIII

HE MUST NOT COME BACK

THE afternoon that Gwendolen met the Silent Rancher by appointment, to take tea on the Zam-besi, was the day upon which the great climax came in Elaine McNair's life. While he, the Rancher, was voicing his plea, she, beside the swaying banana, was clinging passionately to her baby-boy, and striving vainly to soothe and comfort him.

And all the time on that dreadful afternoon she heard the river calling. Insistently, resolutely, commandingly, it called through her very heart's blood. She bowed herself low over the sobbing, terror-stricken child, hushing him against her breast with every tenderness and endearment conceivable, but all the time, somewhere outside herself, somewhere vaguely beyond, the river was calling.

It was a madness, and she knew it; but what of that? Who had made her mad? . . . what had made her mad? . . . Was it not the man-fiend who owned her body and soul, and the spirit of the waters that had become absorbed into her spirit, through the long, unutterable pain-wrung silences.

She tried not to think of the past hour. She

tried not to hear Jamie's low, frightened whimper. She hushed and fondled the baby-boy, and tried, as so often before, to close the ears and eyes of her brain to what had gone. But it was all there still—too poignant, too vivid to be even dulled, though she gave all her strength to it. Did not her own bruises cry out with a dull, continuous ache; though deadened by her keener suffering in her child? Three times he had struck her savagely; but it was only when he touched the child she had felt the madness seize her. Whether she would or no, her thoughts ran back. For ten days there had been calm. Since the dreadful incident of the gun he had touched none of them. He had even been amiable. He had taken Jamie out with him and been good to him. He had made advances to Billy, which the child was too terrified to return, and he had only scowled without saying anything. Jamie was frightened too, but he was also artful. He knew that while the mood lasted his father would spoil him in every way—and even if it ended in a blow, on the whole it was worth it. Billy was different. Behind the terror in his baby eyes, there was baby defiance. His beautiful little face somehow looked scorn and loathing in the midst of its terror. And because he knew why the expression was there, and that it was just, his father hated him in return.

And then had come the fatal day. She hardly knew how it began. Things had gone wrong early, and then she had seen the white look about her husband's lips, and the greyness in his face, that betokened the usual frenzied attack of ungovernable passion. Billy was very poorly with

a touch of fever, and she hushed him fearfully lest his little piteous wail should draw any of the wrath towards himself. Jamie she persuaded to go and see his friend at the Power Station, in charge of the nurse-boy. Finally she had tucked Billy upon the sofa, and got out her sewing-machine because the sound of it seemed to soothe him.

Then had come the final scene.

Shouting to her roughly, and white with concentrated passion, her husband had come storming into the room.

After that most things were blurred. She had no distinct notion as to how she was in fault. Probably she was not in fault at all, but merely the helpless scapegoat because he had been discovered in some of his idle, slovenly habits, and had had a taste of the Administrator's cutting tongue. She only knew that he towered over her in all his cruel strength, muttering curses, and then, because she did not speak, struck her brutally. She was too dazed to cry out, and her very silence seemed to further irritate him, so that he snatched up the machine, and threatened to break it on her head. Instead, cruelly remembering that she was useful to him, he broke it up on the floor. Then it was that Billy, roused suddenly, gave a little shriek of terror, and commenced to cry aloud. He turned to the sofa. Instantly the mother was alert.

"He is ill," she said—"don't touch him. If you will go away I will soon hush him to sleep."

"I am not going away to please any damned baby," was the rough retort. "He has got to be quiet now." He took a step forward, and she

seized his arm. With an oath, he hit her again, and she reeled back against the wall. The child's cries grew louder.

"Don't touch him," she said once more, and something in her voice made him pause and look into her face.

"I'll teach you to speak to me in that tone," he sneered. "Now, just see whether I'll touch him or not." She darted forward, but he only struck her for the third time, and before she could regain her balance, he had caught the child by his clothes, swung him round twice, head downwards, and thrown him in a heap into a corner of the room.

"Now see if he'll be quiet enough," he said, and flung out of the house.

That was half an hour ago, and the child was still giving little choking sobs and gasps. Exhaustion was making him quieter: but she saw he looked very ill, and in her soul was the dumb, helpless rage of an animal. She could scarcely think coherently at all, but amid the confusion in her mind was one thought strong and clear:—If he came back before the child had quite recovered, terror would probably unhinge the delicate brain for life. If he came back in a dangerous mood at all, no one could answer for the consequences.

She looked into the poor little frail, tear-stained face, and the dumb fury within her grew stronger. What was it she had said that dreadful night of the gun? . . . "It were better they had no parent at all than a father such as he." She re-

peel-d it again, over and over, as she had done before.

And as she did so, the waters called.

"Then he must not come back," said a voice amid the river's calling.

For another half hour she sat on, and all the time the spirit of the waters worked a madness in her brain. Something new seemed born into herself that she did not recognize—something stern, and inexorable, and stronger than death.

Jamie ceased his whimpering, to proceed with his tea, and the sick child sank into a sleep of exhaustion.

When he woke he would be safe with the nurse boy, who was devoted to him. He would be safe as long as his father did not come back. One thought, and one only, now seemed to obsess her brain. "His father must not come back. He must never come back. Better no parent at all than one such as he."

She tucked him up in his little bed, kissed Jamie, and went outside to the river bank.

And in her eyes was the light of high resolve. She looked down the river to where the brooding spirit, as of shimmering light, hung suspended over the cataract of waters, and the expression on her face was the expression of a young Joan of Arc, strong to answer some spirit call for the sake of righting wrong, regardless of all question of cost. In her heart she saw but one issue. To save her children, and free their future lives from the baneful influence, the curse, of such a father, she, their mother, who alone knew of the tragedy, must act at once, and afterwards suffer the supreme penalty

of the law. She must give her life to make theirs endurable. Years of dumb, helpless misery had brought her at last to this supreme moment, not of revenge, but of self sacrifice.

She knew where he had gone. Only the previous day he had said that that afternoon he intended to cut an opening in the trees on the promontory, opposite the main cataract, and put a seat there for tourists.

She saw that their own canoe was missing, and she knew that was where he had gone. It would seem, however, that Fate was her ally, for in the place of their own canoe, tethered to the bank, was that of the Power Station engineer, in which Jamie had returned, instead of walking as usual. Silently, swiftly, without one backward glance she stepped down, took her seat, and pushed off into the current. She was scarcely away from the landing place when she had already stopped to take any; she only knew, as she scoured the rapid down with the sweep of the river, that voices ahead were calling—calling—calling.

It seemed to be the cataracts that were calling now, the river itself but rushed her along to the voices ahead. It was from the midst of the tumultuous roar, where the mighty river sprang to its goal, that the voices sounded loudest. She felt they were urging her to hasten fearlessly. She felt the waters were crying out to her that they were her friend. At the supreme plunge there was tumult, recklessness, power, fury, wild reveling, all the strongest passions, and amid these voices, a voice was clear, insistent, that cried to her—
"Here! Here!"

At a safe point above the Falls, she ran the canoe into the trees, and landed on the north bank. Then she pushed her way through the undergrowth to the footpath leading along the northern extremity.

Far down below her was the boiling maelstrom of waters at the foot of the gorge. She looked down, and for a moment her heart misgave her. For the gorge wore a new expression to-day. For the first time she saw cruelty in those sinister depths; cold, keen, sharp-edged cruelty.

Then she heard the sound of an axe; of an axe lopping off boughs. He was there, then, this man who must not come back, making the opening in the trees on the edge of the precipice he had spoken of.

And now the dull, angry red of the sunset Gwendolen had watched, feeling unnerved, caught the great flood of water, caught the hovering spirit of feathery foam, caught the very green of the foliage, and turned all the world blood-red. A swift horror caught her senses. She looked down into the angry, swirling whirlpool, and the sudden expression of cruelty that had shown itself to her for the first time grew and gained on her distraught imagination, until it seemed that down there in the darkening gorge the river ran blood. She stepped aside with a motion of horror, and was for hastening back home. Only the voices still called—the voices that urged her to go on and dare everything, even the supreme penalty, crying out to her that they, the waters, were her friend and were only waiting to do their share and help her.

Spurred by a blind impulse, she went forward, scarcely knowing what she did.

A man, lurking in the Rain Forest, saw her across the chasm, and because he feared the angry animal on his way to the gun point, and stood looking over the gorge, she reappeared, and, if his hopes were correct, bidden her to wait for him to join her.

But just as he gained the point a thing happened that momentarily froze his blood with horror.

There was a sudden hoarse cry, then a sharp cracking of branches, followed by a second's intolerable suspense.

The next instant the body of the assailant fell through the trees and plunged with a dreadful splash into the water below, which seemed to grip him and close with him like a monster seizing its prey.

At the same instant a woman, coming from the forest and cleaving through the air, fell into the water with horror, the waterer saw the branches dragged aside, and a woman's white, distraught face peer over.

A moment later it was gone again, but no longer Berridge had had time to recognize the housekeeper's wife, Elaine McNair.

XIX

A DINNER IN THE WILDERNESS

THERE was a small dinner-party at Government House that evening, partly in honour of Sir Henry Mahon's future wife. One or two well-known people who happened to be staying at the "Falls Hotel" were there, an eminent Rhodesian politician from Southern Rhodesia, the Judge from North Eastern Rhodesia, who was passing through, and the district doctor. Gwendolen went to dress rather wearily. She was still feeling unaccountably oppressed. She knew so much about the sad side of life, it seemed to her the more pitiful that two people who truly had a chance of happiness should juggle with that chance. Yet what could she do? She watched Evelyn return with her golf clubs, and the Hippo go down through the garden to meet her; and she saw with generous admiration how fair and pleasing she was, this woman that Ranger Metcalfe loved, and Sir Henry Mahon was going to marry. And from the bottom of her heart she wished she could right what an intuition as unerring as Metcalfe's told her was going to be so deplorably wrong. If she could but win the girl's confidence, she believed she could do it; but there lay the difficulty. Quiet, unsophisticated,

simple as Evelyn was, she was yet intensely reserved, self-reliant, and ready to stand on her dignity. Unless something unforeseen helped to break down the barrier between them, Gwendolen felt she would only make things more difficult by attempting to force it, and defeat her own ends. And to add to her difficulties, a telegram had reached Government House during their absence, stating that the northern troubles were over, and Sir Henry Mahon might be expected in three weeks. So there would presently be congratulatory health-drinking at the little dinner-party, in view of the now fast approaching wedding.

But before the time for toasts came to the diners, tragedy itself was to stand in their midst.

When Gwendolen stepped out from her room on to the wide, gaily-lighted verandah, perfectly gowned and coiffured, and wearing beautiful jewels, the first thing that struck her was a look almost of appeal in the other woman-guest's eyes. She thought also that she had never seen her look fairer. Evelyn possessed no Parisian gowns and no jewels—but her hair was a glory in itself, as was also the straight, supple, perfect figure, perfect skin, and naturally regal pose of her head. In a simple white gown she could yet, with perfect unconsciousness, look more queenly than many beautiful women with every art to aid them. Together they formed a striking picture. The dark, beautiful woman of the world, with all the subtle charms that may hold. The fair, girlish guest, with the no less subtle charm of awakening understanding. For half a second they seemed to look at each other as if waiting for something, and then

Gwendolen said quite simply, 'You look beautiful to-night.'

The flush deepened in Evelyn's cheeks, a flush of gratification, but the pleasure did not reach her eyes. In their serene blue depths there was still a question. At that moment she would have given anything to be able to ask outright, 'You have seen Mr. Metcalfe this afternoon. Why does he never come here?'

For when the Hippo met her across the garden, he had related how, out sailing during the afternoon, he had seen the Levens having tea on the bank with Ranger Metcalfe.

Gwendolen, in ignorance of this, said nothing of their afternoon companion, and a second later they were joined by the men.

Long after, Evelyn remembered that dinner as a sort of epoch, or turning-point. They dined on the verandah, waited upon by the four solemn imposing natives, resplendent in their gold-embroidered, scarlet zouaves, between the courses each standing like a statue at one of the four corners of the table. Behind the Administrator stood the impassive, dignified English butler, as a sort of master of ceremonies. On the table were costly silver and glass. Below the verandah a black sentry with loaded gun paced up and down. The young Administrator himself, tall and commanding, added a finishing touch to a scene that appealed to the imagination in every sense, by its novelty and its charm. For beyond the glass and the silver and the ceremony, scarcely more than a stone's throw from the verandah, was the wide wilderness of Africa. Beyond the lights, beyond

1. The first of the two main parts of the report is a general survey of the situation in the country. This part is divided into two sections: the first section deals with the political situation, and the second section deals with the economic situation.

[illegible][illegible]

lives of a life in which disease, and last, and not least, our lot."

We owe these creatures something beside money. We owe them something deeper and wider even than this money itself. We owe them protection because we have taken their land. Those of us who are Christians owe them Gospel teachings. We owe them a humane command, but every single white man who wishes to do so owes them enlightenment. We owe them the rule of justice and law and order in the great Republic of Humanity itself. And that is exactly what we fail to do where in the discharge of our duty we fail. Where there are no white men—where there are—where there are—we have not been able to keep them from their old degradation. We have not been able to cope with it. Where we can do so, we do. But what is that if we leave the worst of the trouble untouched? There should be no such neglects throughout the length and breadth of the country whose chief duty is to cope with all sorts of disease but with the condition of things that brings the disease and to stamp out all sorts of very revolting, degrading practices that still exist.

"And who is to pay the piper?" asked some one.

"The natives themselves, of course. It is they who will buy the land and they must pay."

"Which probably means another rising!"

"Then let them rise. Isn't it better they should rise and a few hundreds be killed learning law and order than that thousands in the future should

Evelyn drew a deep breath, as of one stirred to her depths, and looked steadily at her plate without saying anything.

"The country interests you?" he asked; "you are perhaps going to live out here?"

"I am," with a little smile.

"You will find it interesting. Young things struggling blindly to fulfilment always are. And we shall go forward, whatever our mistakes. In the main we shall go forward. . . ."

"And what about union with the other South African States? . . ." asked an interested stranger. "Is that going to be your programme, or not?"

"At the present time I am of opinion that it would be madness—absolute madness; and I am convinced that is the serious opinion of the majority of thinking men throughout the country."

"But why? Surely one of your own members is urging it? I see he asks the people of Rhodesia to rise above all racial feeling, and regard their brother Dutchmen as men who fought and bled for their country, and are now holding out the olive-branch and saying, 'Let us work together for the common good.' Presumably he proposes to begin by making them a present of large interests in your plucky Colony, redeemed from savagery and barbarity at the cost of so much British blood and British valour?" and there was a little significant curl about the speaker's lips.

"He may ask many things of the people of Rhodesia," was the quiet reply, "but it does not follow they will agree to give them. The people of Rhodesia having passed out of the kindergarten

sage, are acquiring a very laudable habit of thinking things out for themselves, instead of asking advice off-hand from anyone."

"And you think they do not want union?"

"I think the majority of them realize that the time has not yet come for it." Pressed to give a reason, he added:

"Take the question of representation alone.

"This, in the Union, has been based upon the number of adult white males in the four States of South Africa, which amounts in the aggregate to roughly three hundred and fifty thousand voters. In this country, at the outside we have but seven thousand. Again, the number of representatives to be allowed to the four Colonies is one hundred and twenty one. We could not expect to send more than six or seven. Until we can obtain adequate and effective representation, much as I dislike the idea of Crown Colony government, let us have that sooner than absorption into the Union."

"And supposing you prove something of a hindrance to the great Imperial idea, through your action?" asked the stranger, who seemed bent on drawing him out.

"We should naturally be both regretful and apologetic," with a little smile, "but it doesn't follow that therefore we should gracefully relinquish the country we have founded and brought through to prosperity at such a cost. After all, we, the forerunners, are under an obligation to the Rhodesias of the future that has a deeper significance than any obligation we may have to the Imperial idea of a United South Africa. We have first to consider what seems to us the best for them.

In fulfilling this trust to the best of our ability we shall most surely hasten the day in which Rhodesia is in a position to join the Union on acceptable terms, and at the same time maintain her own individuality. . . .” He was about to continue, but just at that moment the interruption came.

XX

“ I HAVE KILLED THEIR FATHER ”

FROM the dim end of the verandah, where was the main entrance, there was an unexpected sound of footsteps—the dragging footsteps of a woman carrying a burden she could scarcely support, and the little shuffling steps of a tired child. Then into the light and glitter, the gaiety and laughter, came Elaine McNair, with her wan, white face, and haunting eyes. Billy hung heavily in her arms, a dead weight, while Jamie clung to her skirt. She went straight to the Administrator, as if she saw nothing else on the verandah at all, and while she stood before him a sudden, death-like silence fell upon the company at the dinner table. With parted lips and straining eyes everyone gazed

so impressively at the strangely pitted line grown on the Administrator's brow.

Then with eyes looking down and with typical composure, into Mr. Carington's "Daine" she

"I have kind'd their father," she said in a distinct tones. "It was better than should have no parent at all than a father such as he. I have come to give myself up. Will you please . . . her voice faltered brokenly . . . "see that the children are with someone who is kind to them?"

A stifled murmur broke from the listeners. All were so taken aback that for a moment no one seemed to know what to do. And then, in that critical instant, the true nobility of Gwendolen Lett's soul rose and showed itself. That thought she would never forget the manner in which she got up from the table, moved round behind the guests with her heart full of love and talking about her feet, and went up to the exhausted mother. With a smile of extraordinary gentleness she held out her arms. "Let me hold 'em," she said simply; "you are so tired," and she took the heavy, sleeping child from the arms that were numb with weariness. Almost at the same moment her husband stood beside her. "He is too heavy for you, let me take him," he said, and she gave him up.

Then the Administrator pressed away his chair and got to his feet. It was plain that he was utterly at a loss what to make of the extraordinary scene. His movement seemed to start Jamie, who immediately commenced to wail aloud. Still complete mistress of the situation, Gwendolen made a sign to the Hippo, who drew the little

chap aside, and proceeded to comfort him with bon-bons from the silver dishes. So Elaine was left standing alone with downcast eyes before the Administrator; and the group waited.

"Who are you?" he said, still quite at a loss.

"I am Elaine McNair. My husband was Conservator. I . . . I . . . have killed him." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "He is in the whirlpool at the foot of the Falls. I had to do it for the children's sake; but I have come to give myself up."

Again a half-stifled murmur shook the group as of unendurable tension, and the Administrator looked at Gwendolen, as if asking her help. In the meantime Gwendolen's quick brain had gained some sort of a grip of the situation.

"I think she is too exhausted to explain anything now. It would be best for her to rest a little while inquiries are made and we decide what is to be done."

Even as she spoke, the girl swayed a little, and the doctor hurried forward.

"Bring her into my room." Gwendolen said quickly and the doctor half-carried her across the verandah. When they had given her a restorative and settled her in a large chair with Billy on a sofa beside her, sleeping peacefully, they went back to the group at the table who were still in an attitude of waiting. The Secretary was despatching messengers and Wynyard Leven trying to get news on the telephone, when once again steps at the dim end of the verandah arrested them, hurrying steps this time, and, looking somewhat dishevelled and blanched, Berridge strode up to the group. Some-

ting in his face caught the instant attention of everyone present—a look of resolve that was almost fierce. His keen eyes seemed to have narrowed from the due intensity of their gaze, his lips to have grown rigid with firmness, his chin set more square with the weight of some invulnerable decision.

“Is she here? . . .” he asked, a little sharply, looking from one to the other of the group, and knowing by their faces that she was.

“She is.” The Administrator had seated himself again, and he spoke firmly. Whatever his punishment had been before, he had all his wits about him now, and he was not only prepared to grapple with the amazing situation, but to take it in hand officially as the first man in the country.

“Can you enlighten us at all? Where is James McNair?”

“He is dead.”

“Ah!” . . . the exclamation broke involuntarily, and remembering what the woman had said, a thrill of horror passed through the listeners. Evelyn’s face was whiter than the tablecloth; and without knowing it, she was clenching her hands till the nails dug into the flesh, in an effort to steady her nerves. It was impossible not to know that something terrible had happened. Nay, worse, that something terrible had been happening in their midst, perhaps for some time, while they ate and drank and slept and played in light and careless ease. Somewhere close at hand a tragedy had been unfolding itself, working blindly towards some criminal point.

And now the point was reached. It was here

bald, and naked, and terribly real—in the midst of the glass and silver, the gleam and glitter, the laughing, distinguished, gaily-dressed groups of diners. And yet not all was here at present. The unfolding was not yet complete. There was more to come.

After a few tense seconds the Administrator half rose.

"It would be better, perhaps, if you gave me all the facts you can in my office."

"If you will allow me, sir, it would be better I think, to give them here."

So significant was the speaker's tone that the Administrator half unconsciously sat down again. The very sternness of Berridge's determination seemed to compel them all to follow him and act as he would dictate. For the moment, he, and he alone, was the strong man of the party. And Evelyn knew, through some strange intuition, that next to him, perhaps from sheer greatness of soul at that critical moment, came Gwendolen Leven. She saw her rise suddenly and move forward, so that she stood where she could see full into Berridge's eyes. She knew that some supreme moment was yet to come, and that in some way Gwendolen out of her strength would share it. Not she, with her clean and speckless past, her lofty aims and dreams, her approaching sphere of influence; but this woman upon whom she had passed judgment as sinner and reprobate, faithless and undeserving.

"As you will," said the Administrator, looking hard into the man's face.

"Has Mrs. McNair herself given any account of the . . . accident?"

There was not a syllable missing, not a syllable surrised. He seemed purposely to pause on the last three words, to give them time to sink into the brains of each of his hearers. And all the time he was looking hard at Gwendolen Leven.

"She has," said the Administrator; "but if you will give us your account, it will be advisable to leave hers for the present."

And it was then that Evelyn, watching from the background with all her soul rapt with expectation, saw the sudden swift appeal in Berridge's eyes, the sudden look almost of command with which he implored Gwendolen to speak. Instantly braving the Administrator's displeasure, Gwendolen said very quietly,—"I think it should be known to Mr. Berridge that Mrs. McNair has made a confession." And at once something which had been revealed to the two women that it was the one clue he wanted.

The Administrator hesitated, bit his lip and, without looking at Gwendolen, said, "Mrs. McNair came here a quarter of an hour ago with her two children, and said that she had killed their father."

Every eye turned more fixedly to the dark, inscrutable face of the last-comer. Life or death itself might have hung on his reply. Honour or dishonour did hang.

"She did nothing of the kind," he said in a voice so quiet, and clear, and direct, that a sigh of instant relief broke from the assembled group. Only the two women, scarcely able to breathe for

tension, saw that the fierce grip of his hands and the tenseness of his whole attitude belied the perfect calm of his assertion, and proclaimed it forced.

The two women, and one other. While the question had been asked and answered, the doctor, a tall, distinguished-looking man with a keenly sympathetic, clever face, had risen also, and moved very quietly to a position where he could see the faces of both Berridge and Gwendolen. Thus he stood, with his fine face a little in shadow, and keen eyes striving to read what was behind the brains of these two compelling spirits.

"Can you prove it?" the Administrator asked, in a calmly judicial voice.

"I can. I was an eye-witness."

They all seemed to press closer, and the tension returned.

"I was taking photographs in the Rain Forest, when I saw someone I took to be Mrs. McNair pass along the north end of the Falls. I made my way at once on to Danger Point, intending to signal to her that I would come round by the bridge and join her.

"When I reached the Point I saw McNair lopping off branches to clear a view of the main cataract from the promontory. Suddenly he gave a sharp cry, and the next instant he crashed through the branches into the whirlpool below. I shouted to Mrs. McNair, but she did not answer. She was not near the spot at the time. She was still loitering at the north end.

"I rushed to the bridge, and shouted to the man at the toll to follow me. We climbed down the gorge, and crept along the rocks to the nearest

possible point to where I had seen him disappear. We watched for about ten minutes, without seeing any signs of the body, and then Walker hurried off to the hotel to get help. While we were down below, I looked up and saw Mrs. McNair come to the edge of the precipice and look down. It struck me instantly that the shock had clouded her brain. She looked demented. I made signs to her that I was coming, and would she wait for me. When Walker went to the hotel, I hurried round by the bridge to look for her. When I reached the promontory, she had vanished. I was afraid for a moment she had thrown herself over; but I discovered the marks of her returning footsteps, and concluded she had gone home. I waited a little longer to see if I could be of any help, and then I followed her. When I reached the house, I found only a native there, and he said the Dona had gone to Livingstone. When I reached the trolley-line, I found she had started to walk along it, carrying one child and leading the other. I was thoroughly frightened, because there seemed to me no longer the smallest doubt that the shock had turned her brain. It was sheer madness to attempt such a walk with the two children. I started up the line expecting to find her overcome with exhaustion, but after I had gone a little way I met a boy who told me she had encountered a down trolley, and persuaded the boys to turn it and take her back to Livingstone. Then I came straight here."

There was a breathing silence. Everyone, for the moment, seemed too much moved to speak.

Gwendolen was the first to break it.

"Poor child," she said softly. "It is easy to see that she is not herself."

The Administrator was staring at the ground looking abnormally grave. Only one person moved. The doctor stood forward a little, where he could catch Gwendolen's eye if she looked for him. He seemed half expecting that she would. He also, as Evelyn, with the keen perception of finely-strung temperament, had recognized that here was something more than met the eye and ear—some drama going forward of tense moment. And there was yet one other distinctly on the alert only he, as the sense of tragic import became clearer to his mind, looked swiftly and keenly from the stern, strong face of the witness to the quiet face of the woman, and instead of pressing forward, as he might have done in his capacity of judge, leaned backward where he could see without being seen.

At last the Administrator broke silence, and it was impossible to tell from his manner whether he also felt anything of the subtle mind struggle. Abrupt at all times, he was still more abrupt in moments of stress, and he now asked resolutely.

"Why, if your version is correct, does Mrs. McNair say that she killed her husband?"

Berridge seemed to draw in his breath sharply, in an effort to speak naturally and calmly.

"It is hallucination. There is no other explanation. She was some distance away when he fell."

"Why does she also say that the children were better with no parent at all than a father such as he?"

"Because," and the very quietness and clearness

man's tone robbed what he said of any chance for condemnation. "I am not a man of claim of justice," James McNair went on. "I have lost a deal more than ever had. He was my son-in-law and cruel to his children. I have known him for twenty years, and I have never known him as anything but a bully and a tyrant who took delight in ill-treating another as was in his power."

"Then why have you never spoken? Why has she never spoken?" and the Administrator looked up with stern eyes.

A shudder which had half caught the life in his chest went away to hear his answer.

"Because, though I have watched and waited I have never been able to get sufficient tangible proof. His wife would not appear against him herself, partly because of her terror of him, she was too clever to leave any loop-hole. But she will, I think, bear witness that what I have said is true."

"You . . ." the exclamation broke from the Administrator as a surprised question as he turned to where Gwendolen stood.

"Yes," she answered quietly. "About ten days ago I went to see Mrs. McNair, and I saw proof of what Mr. Berridge says. Since then, I too have been watching and waiting."

Unable to help herself, Evelyn hid her face in her hands. The strain was becoming almost too much for her. For she had grasped the last strand now, and her heart unerringly told her the truth. She perceived that this man and this woman, whatever they believed or disbelieved, by the sheer might of their wills were bent on shedding from

every possible shadow of disgrace in the future a helpless young mother whom they knew had been cruelly and foully wronged by the dead man.

It was a duel between justice in the abstract and justice of cold, calm reasoning. It was the unwritten law working silently in hearts that were free enough and brave enough to sweep aside everything for the sake of a wronged and helpless fellow-creature. It was the "blind understanding" whereby human nature, stumbling in the dark, is sometimes able to rise above the level of the seen and known.

And because she was by nature strong and free when her life and circumstances left her unbiassed her whole heart went out to the two principal actors in the drama before her. It made her feel more than ever that here in this wilderness out post she was indeed in touch with the tense heart of humanity.

Whatever her position in a great city, how many lives might she have lived and never come even within sight of any scene so poignant, so throbbing with intensity, so literally choked with heart-beats from humanity's own great heart, as that assembly round the gaily-lighted dinner-table in the heart of Africa, with their tense, eager faces—the grave young Administrator, representing impersonally law and justice; the rather rough, unpolished, rock-hewn witness, with his stern, resolute face, carrying a subtle sense of something vaguely splendid in his unflinching eyes; and the beautifully-dressed woman of Society's drawing-rooms, rising fearlessly to answer the crying need of the moment, and breaking through all the barbed-wired fences

and obstacles of conventional propriety to lend support to a man who, for aught she knew, was lying broadly, to save a thousand words.

It drove home to her shiveringly how little, after all, she knew of what the world held—she who had dared to judge, and dared to denounce. What anguish of disillusionment and suffering might there not be hidden in the past of such a woman as Gwendolen Leven. What horror—what helpless, unendurable pain—might there not be in the past of that girl mother, with her drawn, white face, and haunting, sorrow laden eyes. Yet, if a truth she was learning fast now—learning fast in this out-of-the-way corner of the world.

The effect of Gwendolen's admission on the Administrator was difficult to tell, but he still looked dramatically grave.

"Did any one else know anything?" he asked, giving a half glance at the group. "No," he added. "As there is practically no possibility of the body being recovered for an inquest, it is as well that what there is to be told should be told now."

Gwendolen turned her head also, and looked suddenly, as if a new thought had occurred to her, for the doctor. It was the glance she had been awaiting, and once again the subtle telegraphic minds in tune communicated a mutual thought. He stepped forward at once.

"May I say that I had my suspicions," he said. "I attended the eldest child for an attack of fever a few weeks ago, and it seemed to me that in no way Mrs. McNair was not normal. I was deterred without being able to obtain any clear answer why I

should feel this, beyond certain suspicious bruises, but without in the smallest degree abating my suspicions. From what I saw then, and from what I have seen to-night, I should not have the smallest hesitation in stating professionally that Mrs McNair's brain has been in an abnormal condition for some weeks, and that the shock of this afternoon has for the time being clouded her reason.

"I believe she is not at the moment responsible for any statement she may make; and that what she has just said was a perfectly natural outcome of thoughts we cannot any of us help believing to have been often in her mind, now we have heard her story. I think, with Mr. Berridge, that what she has said in her unhinged, unbalanced state of mind is undoubtedly hallucination, resulting from the shock of seeing her husband fall."

Had he looked up, he would have seen in the eyes of that other man and woman an expression that would have rewarded him over and over; but he only looked steadily into the no less steady eyes of the Administrator.

From somewhere down the table there broke a half-stifled murmur of relief, almost like applause. It came from where the Judge still sat back in the shadow.

"Then what do you think we should do for her?" Reginald Cardington asked.

"I think that, for the present, she and the children should be cared for at the hospital. Then, perhaps, a way might be found to send her to England." He hesitated—"It is possible she may not recover while she remains here."

For the first time the Judge spoke. "In that

case," he said. "will you allow me to be personally responsible for her passage?"

A low murmur of heartfelt approval greeted his request, and Evelyn found the tears restrainable no longer, coursing down her cheeks.

And then Gwendolen spoke, looking from the doctor to the Administrator. "Would it be better for her to be cared for by someone she knows? At the hospital all are strangers. May the children go to the nurses for the time being, and their mother remain here with me?" She turned to the Administrator, "I should be very glad if you would allow me to arrange this."

He looked at her a moment doubtfully, but his eyes showed no shadow of turning. "Arrange it exactly as you wish," he said.

"Thank you," and as she turned away it was the signal for the party to break up and depart. The Judge and the politician went back to the "Falls Hotel," and the Administrator, accompanied by the two secretaries and Meredith, retired to his office to decide what further was to be done in connection with the dead man. The doctor and Gwendolen talked together in low voices, and then went back to the mother and children. Evelyn stood alone, leaning her head with an exhausted expression against one of the verandah posts, and looking with tired eyes out into the darkness. At that moment the yearning for the strong, cheerful face, and renewing, restful personality of the Silent Rancher made her feel weary unto death.

A few minutes later Gwendolen and the doctor reappeared, and this time the doctor was carrying the baby-boy, and had Jamie clinging to his hand.

Evidently he was going to take them to the hospital himself. Evelyn watched him, and her heart swelled. What men there were, out here in the wilderness! what strong, fearless, generous-hearted Englishmen.

At a call from Gwendolen a native came forward to carry Jamie, and the little group separated. But before she returned to her room, the Administrator's door opened and Berridge came out. When he saw Gwendolen, he hurried forward, and hearing his step, she waited. Neither of them had noticed the silent figure in white leaning against the verandah post.

"God bless you!" he breathed, a little brokenly, as he came up to her. "I . . . I . . . simply can't thank you. Your support meant everything. I might not have been able to clear her alone. I don't know how to thank you."

"Why should you?" very simply. Then she added, half to the night, "A woman who has been hurt herself must always help another woman. Even if she had been different, and I had not cared for her as I do, I should have tried to help her."

"I do not know what happened," he went on in a low voice, "except that he struck her brutally this afternoon, and not content with that, ill-treated the child. I had it from the cook-boy when I went to the house to look for her. He said . . . but why harrow you with it? And it doesn't matter now."

"No, it doesn't matter now."

"That is all I know, except that she did follow him to the Falls."

"That, and that she was, and is, distraught. She will need all our care."

"How good you are!" he breathed fervently. "If you will take care of her for a little while, and help me to get her safely away to England, in a year I shall be able to go home and take care of her myself."

And then, for the first time, Evelyn understood how deep the man's generous loyalty went.

There only remained one thing for her to do. When Berridge left Gwendolen alone, she went up to her a little timidly.

"I want to tell you that I think you are splendid," she said. "Please let me help you take care of her. I . . . I . . . have had unkind thoughts of you . . . but I did not understand. Perhaps I was not able to see deep enough. Now, if you will forgive me and let me help you, I will gladly do anything."

Gwendolen smiled at her very softly.

"It was perfectly natural," she said, "but I hoped you might see differently some time. Shall I tell you why? Because you are one of the women one minds about. There are not many. The verdict of most does not matter in the least. With a few it is different. You are one of them."

To herself she said—"It is all that was needed. Now I shall probably be able to save her as well."

XXI

AN ATTEMPT AND A FAILURE

For three days Elaine's reason hung in the balance. She lay quite still in the little room through Gwendolen's, and never spoke. If she opened her eyes, she only looked fixedly towards the window, without apparently seeing anything. She never asked for the children, and it was only with the greatest difficulty they could induce her to touch any food. Always she looked as if she were striving to recall something that baffled, and puzzled, and confused her. Gwendolen and Evelyn nursed her all night and all day by turns. Never for one moment dare they leave her alone. The Administrator urged a nurse, but Gwendolen overruled him, and Evelyn understood instinctively that it was because she, and Berridge, and the doctor felt it advisable they should be the only ones who knew what she said when her mind grew clear again. The further realization that they trusted her implicitly, gave her a deep sense of gladness.

On the fourth day Elaine spoke.

Gwendolen and Evelyn were both in the room, but Evelyn, because she was a stranger, moved out of sight.

The invalid had been gazing hard at the window for some time as usual, when a look of recollec-

er seemed to come slowly back into the puzzle of smiling eyes.

Gwendolen, seeing the change, moved nearer, and spoke to her in a soft, encouraging tone. Elsie looked hard at her, and then said, "Oh, I remember, you are Mrs. Leven. You came to see me. I knew I had seen you before." She paused, as if trying to collect herself further, and then said, with startling suddenness, "I did not actually kill him—but I meant to when I started out."

"We knew you did not," Gwendolen told her soothingly.

"How did you know? How could you know? I . . . I . . . meant to kill him. I told him I should, if he ill-treated Billy."

Gwendolen said nothing, but smoothed her hair compassionately. She wanted her, it possible, to get while her brain was clear. Even now there might lose her, without the greatest care.

At last she spoke again.

"Perhaps that was it. He saw me suddenly. I was standing quite still a few yards away. I was feeling faint and giddy, and everything was swimming round, and I held my head between my hands trying to pull myself together. I . . . he . . . I . . . had hurt my head, and it ached and throbbed. Then he looked round, and saw me suddenly. I don't know what happened. He looked scared, and started backwards. Then he fell. I was too ill to push him, but I meant to when I started out, and it seemed as if it was the same thing."

Evelyn, through tear-filled eyes, saw a suspicious

glisten in Gwendolen's, and knew that for a moment she could not trust herself to speak.

"Was it the same thing?" Elaine asked. She was exhausted, but seemed suddenly growing feverish with anxiety—"Was it the same thing? I meant to give myself up, and I did . . . but . . . but . . . the children have no one else . . . except me." She raised herself on her elbow—"Do you think it will make any difference?" Every second her mind grew clearer, and her eyes seemed to devour Gwendolen's face with beseeching. "If I might be allowed to live, and perhaps see them occasionally, or work for them? . . . Shall I? . . . Shall I? . . . ever see them again?"

"You shall see them to-morrow if you are well enough," mastering her voice with an effort, "and by and by you shall take care of them always."

"Then . . . then . . . you think it will make a difference that I did not . . . actually . . . that I only thought it. . . ."

"Of course, it will make all the difference. Besides, you were not even near at the time. Mr. Beridge saw him fall, you know. He caught his foot. No one could possibly blame you. You have been ill a few days, and the children are being taken care of at the hospital; but when you are well again, then you shall go home to England with them."

"You . . . you mean all that . . ." fearfully, and then, because the relief was too much for her, she fainted away.

When she came round she was in a high fever, and lay for two dreadful days and nights at death's

floor. Hour after hour her roving, showing as it did how pitiful her life had been while the souls of the two devoted watchers and almost unmaimed the strong, quiet doctor whom she occasionally took for her husband and snatched from in a manner that was heart-rending. But in the end their untiring efforts were rewarded and she sank into a deep sleep, from which she awakened with her mind clear, and asked feebly for the children. After that Gwendolen yielded to the wishes of her husband and the Administrator, and a hospital nurse was installed in the sick-room, allowing Evelyn and herself to take a badly needed rest.

Thus it was a whole week after her parting with Ranger Metcalfe before Gwendolen had a chance to give her mind to the several problems now pressing more urgently upon her, as Sir Henry Mahon's date of arrival grew nearer. If at every hour spent together in the sick-room her cemented their friendship did not, however, give her the required opening, and another week had passed without any solution having presented itself. Then came Saturday, bringing on the morning train a gay breakfast party to Government House, in the persons of the young Duke of Westmorland and two friends, bound for a shooting expedition in the wilds of North-Western Rhodesia. Later, Gwendolen and Evelyn went down with the Hippo to see them off at the station and speed them on their journey, in company with various wilderness dwellers bound for lonely homes out there in the great beyond.

The duke's party were very gay. To them the

wide spaces held adventure and novelty; freedom for a space from irksome social demands, and penalties of high position; forgetfulness of much that makes the everyday, commonplace hours drag.

Of a less joyous spirit were a few Civil Service officials going to their several districts, to live for many months without any white companionship, without home comforts, with scarcely any home news, in more or less fever-stricken localities—soldiers in the vanguard of the great civilizing army, who come to “give” instead of “take”; who, without any of the excitement and glory and onrush of waving banners, and straining horses, and bugle-calls, and shouts of victory, by day and night, week after week, month after month, in ceaseless, wearying routine, give their lives in the service of their country, fulfilling in the lonely places lonely heroisms, unrecognized and unsung. Far and wide over the lonely places lie the graves of these quiet soldiers, unostentatious, unnoticed; quiet in death as in life, accepting the death-blow from weary uncared-for fever beds in the same spirit that the khaki-clad fighter takes his fatal bullet; the same spirit, only perhaps, grander, because it has none of the invigorating, inspiring accessories, answering wherever there are Britishers to the old conquering, soul-stirring lines—

“Their’s not to make reply,
Their’s not to reason why,
Their’s but to do and die”

A question arises: Does England appreciate sufficiently those widespread, lonely graves of her soldiers of progress? Does she remember, in her

dealing with the far-flung lands, what has been the price of Empire? Or does she sometimes listen to the man in power more than to the man who made the power possible, and direct her line of action only from the armchair point of view at home in the grim, hand-to-hand struggle with hard conditions of the long suffering, intrepid man on the spot?

Seeing the lonely, often uncared-for graves where the wilderness soldiers have silently died at their posts, content to have achieved what was expected of them—their duty—one feels that every headstone should bear the simple, inspiring inscription, "England remembers."

And wherever the headstone proclaims that the exile was a woman, her countryman, in passing, should raise his hat to a probable measure of endurance such as is asked for under few other conditions of existence. For the Englishwoman is not born to a solitary, starved, changeless monotony, rendered only the more uncongenial by a trying climate; and nine times out of ten, it is likely that the dead woman was one of the great army of unrecognized heroes.

It was the young, daintily-clad, pretty wife of a Native Commissioner, going to a home a hundred miles from other English dwellers, that gave Gwendolen Leven her first opening with Evelyn. One or two Livingstone ladies, knowing that she would be passing through, in a spirit of comradeship that is more creditable than common, had come down to the station to see if they could do anything to relieve the difficulties of commissariat for the journey, or anything else, and bearing

books and papers and fruit; and Evelyn had particularly remarked it when they were together on the verandah afterwards. Gwendolen was arranging flowers, and she did not look up, but went on with deft, dainty fingers, as she recognized and seized her chance. Evelyn had asked if the traveller had been a friend of the helpers, and Gwendolen, leaning down over her flowers, had answered in an impersonal manner:

"Probably, but I am not at all sure. And in any case, it would not make very much difference." She twisted a rose into place and stood back to observe the effect.

"A woman who is brave enough to go to live in a place like that deserves a sort of homage and friendship from every other woman at hand. You see, they probably *know*; the traveller probably has yet to acquire her knowledge."

"What do they know?" Evelyn found herself asking, almost as if compelled by an unseen force.

"They know that she is perhaps going to a species of martyrdom. It may be all right, and it may be all wrong. Time alone can show. Pluck and determination may help her to win through to contented acceptance. Unforeseen contingencies, on the other hand, may shatter her spirit, and leave her in many ways a wreck. As far as one hears, there are not many halfway courses. The bride who comes out with her true knowledge to be acquired usually comes to victory or defeat. Her courage carries her through to a plane that is in a sense heroic, or . . ." she paused, critically examining her handiwork—"she metaphorically goes under."

Evelyn sat very still, but something in her eyes told Gwendolen she was not only attending intently, but asking for more. "You see," she went on, in the same quiet impersonal voice, "no one ever quite knows what a wilderness existence is from hearsay, or from writings. Each woman has to find it out for herself. In almost every instance, we may take it that it proves far more lonely and difficult than was expected—the loneliness more intense than could have been realizable; the difficulties more trying. It means a test beyond anticipation; usually a proving to the uttermost. To some women this in itself is a spur. They rise to it splendidly, and come through not rarely victorious, but heroines, who have made bricks of satisfaction without straw. To others it proves numbing and unnerving. Comparatively it is only the few, of original tastes, who really find something to delight in from the first. My own feeling is that there would be fewer failures if the great essential in the first place were more fully realized." She moved away with her bowl of roses, placed it to her satisfaction, and came back to commence on another.

"What do you mean by the great essential?" Evelyn asked.

"The quality of the love between husband and wife, and the character of the man." The delicate fingers were busy for some moments in silence. "In these outpost countries, it is often not recognized until too late how much a man must, of necessity, be to his wife. A marriage that might have been a success at home is easily a failure out here. A man who could have given all that was

needed and asked in England may fall very far short in the Colonies. For the man it is probably all right; he has other interests, wherever he is. It is the woman who suffers. It is the woman who comes first to the bitter moment of awakening, when she looks for bread and finds there is only a stone. That is the bitter hour, and the test and the proving of the lonely places. For there is no one else—no neighbours, no sympathetic friends, few occupations and unexpected pleasures—chiefly loneliness and perhaps ill-health. The wife who, under these conditions, asks of her husband the bread he has not the capacity to give must either find it in herself, or find it discredibly—or starve.”

Again there was silence, except for the clipping of scissors, as rose after rose was fitted to its place.

“But you would not feel that about the places where there are many white people together?” Evelyn questioned at last.

“Yes I should, though perhaps in a rather lesser degree. Anywhere in the Colonies, it matters far more than it does at home that a man should be all the world to his wife. Always there is greater occasion to lean on him, and to receive from him—and, failing these, greater danger of shipwreck. If a favourite sister of mine were to come out here to marry a man whom I knew was wanting in these great essentials, were he the Administrator himself, I should move heaven and earth to prevent the marriage.”

Scarcely looking up, she saw the girl on the sofa wince, as if some chance shaft had struck home.

Then suddenly she raised her head, and with

her customary fearless outspokenness, looked into Evelyn's troubled, serious eyes, and said--

"I would not let a young sister of mine marry Sir Henry Mahon."

"Why not?"

The question came short and clear, as if it had been half surprised from her.

"Because, in everything that matters most, he will rail the woman who gives her life into his keeping."

The listener veiled her eyes with her hand.

"How do you know he will fail if he loves her, and she loves him. Love changes all men."

"The change does not necessarily live."

"But surely much depends on the woman. She may influence him always."

"She may, if she *really* loves him," and the slight accent suggested doubt where Evelyn's love was concerned. "Otherwise a love that found nothing of all it had imagined in ignorance might merely irritate him, and make life hell for the disillusioned woman."

Once more, with the same daring she shot a bow at a venture: "If I thought you really loved Sir Henry Mahon, I should not have said what I have. I do not believe it."

"Why not?"

"There are various reasons. For one thing, you hardly know him, and he is twice your age. It is not natural for a girl to give her first, best love to a man twice her age. She might give him affection, and comradeship, and care for him more than anyone else—but she will not, and cannot give him the love of her life. If that has not been

called into being before, it probably will be afterwards—but by another man.”

Evelyn got up from the sofa, and moved to the edge of the verandah and stood looking across into the far-off spaces without seeing anything. She perceived intuitively that it was useless to attempt concealment. Beyond doubt, Gwendolen had discovered that the love of her life was *not* given to Sir Henry Mahon. How much else she surmised she was afraid to think.

On the other hand, in spite of her new admiration for this fearless-spoken, fearless-acting woman she could not let herself be influenced by her. Widening knowledge and widening experience had shown her already that other standards might be as good in their places as hers, without, however in any way freeing her from a sense of personal obligation to be true to her own.

What she now felt she could overlook in Gwendolen she could not, as a natural sequence overlook in herself. The teaching and habits of her whole life held true where she herself was concerned, and resisted the influence of the broader mind.

And Gwendolen realized gravely how much this meant, when, with that natural dignity and firmness that were so characteristic of her, the younger woman presently turned and said quietly—

“I see the drift of your conversation, but it does not influence me. All my life I have held my word as sacred. I could not bring myself to break a solemn promise, without a reason far more serious than your supposition that Sir Henry Mahon may not make a good husband. Every

world has to take her chance of that. I am prepared to take mine."

"Everyone does not take it at an equal risk. Yours is too great. I . . ." she hesitated and then once again plunged—"Evelyn . . . because I have grown fond of you, and because of what I know—I want you to break off our engagement."

"What do you know?" The girl's eyes were strangely compelling, and for once Gwendolen's fell, and she turned to the flower-strewn table. After all, what argument could she advance that had not a sound of petty tale bearing? What good to speak of selfishness, snobbery, pettiness, unpopularity? Suddenly and unexpectedly she realized that both she and Mercutio had met a position unprepared. They might have known that to a girl of Evelyn's spirit it would be of little avail to tell her things that might have been said in spite. True, there was one power—guilt—but that she was debarred from using through the conditions by which she had come to her knowledge.

"What do you know?" Evelyn repeated.

"It is difficult for me to explain. Couldn't we leave that reason alone, and look at it from another point? Has any woman any right to marry a man without loving him? Doesn't she do him a far greater wrong than she would in taking back her promise? It is a view I, personally, hold very strongly—having seen what I have of the twofold misery of loveless marriages."

"Why should you assume that this would be a loveless marriage?"

"Perhaps it is worse," gravely—"perhaps the woman's love is already given elsewhere."

Evelyn's face flamed scarlet, and then turned deadly pale, and she looked straight before her out across the country, without replying.

Gwendolen went on with her flowers, and there was silence between them for some time.

At last Evelyn turned to her.

"In a question as big as this, one cannot act upon supposition, and that, after all, is the most you urge. The facts are simple enough. I gave a promise to Sir Henry Mahon, and I have come here to fulfil it. Had he not been unexpectedly delayed, I should already be married to him. He was delayed by doing his duty. He might, perhaps, have sent another man, for his official position is now civil and not military. In return for this, and because he apparently has enemies who have spoken ill of him, am I to change my mind in the interval and . . . and . . . jilt him?"

"Why need you conclude it is all supposition?"

"Because I think it is."

"But you might try to find out."

"It is too late. I feel myself as good as married already. Apart from the broken promise, I cannot fail him at the eleventh hour."

"And I say it is not too late. It is not too late until the ring is on your finger. And what is more, Evelyn, though you may not know it, you are acting as a slave to prejudice and public opinion. It would be far braver of you, and far kinder, if you had the courage to fail him at the eleventh hour, instead of tying a knot neither of you can undo. If you do not fail him now, it is

"I suppose he will drive you into falling him far more seriously afterwards. Can't you see it in that light?"

"No. I am not weak enough to be driven. I will. She sailed a little wanly. "And out how to make bricks of satisfaction without straw. The substantial brick will be that I kept my word."

Steps were heard approaching, and Evelyn again turned to the contemplation of the view while the Administrator and Wynyard Leven came down the long verandah together.

"Well! . . ." Mr. Cardington said lightly to Gwendolen, "and what did you think of His Grace? Are blue blooded dukes a weakness of yours, or have you a modern day, platonic, sporting, socialistic tendency?"

"I think they are useful," and Gwendolen smiled, as she pushed aside the last of her flowers. "My maid has been just twice as capable and obliging ever since she observed me shake hands and converse on terms of equality with a real blue duke."

From the depths of a big chair where the Hippo had subsided and was mopping a very dazed face, came the comment: "This is too hot a climate to have to cope with dukes. I called him 'your honour,' instead of 'your grace' and I told him, 'His Grace, the Administrator,' would like to see him in his office! . . ."

"Liar! . . ." murmured Wynyard Leven humorously, and they all went down into the garden for tea.

XXII

THE SECRET ABOUT SIR HENRY MAHON

GWENDOLEN was conscious of failure. She had shown her hand and gained nothing by it. Meanwhile Sir Henry Mahon was fast approaching Broken Hill. Evelyn looked very white and worn; the Silent Rancher was, she knew, anxiously awaiting news; and she did not for the moment know which way to turn. For two days she worried and thought, and then she made up her mind. When Gwendolen after much consideration, made up her mind, she rarely changed it again; and now without any further hesitation, she sought an interview with her husband. He came to her in their sitting-room, a little wonderingly, and when he saw her face he knew that what she had to say was important. Yet, once again, she was casually arranging fresh flowers to her satisfaction. Wynyard took up his stand by the French window opening on to the verandah, and watched her, with the admiration that was never far from his eyes.

"Do you remember, soon after the time we heard of Sir Henry Mahon's engagement, telling me of a report that had gone home to headquarters concerning him."

"Yes, I remember."

"I want to tell you that I am going to repeat it to Evelyn Harcourt."

"But, my dear little woman," in quick tones of remonstrance, "you can't possibly do so. You can't repeat an official report like that, which I heard in confidence, and told you in confidence."

"I must, Wyn. It is the only way."

He looked abnormally grave.

"I don't think you quite understand the position. By right neither I nor you had any business to know of it. To make use of information received in that way is . . . is . . . well. I'm afraid it is unpardonable."

"Yes, I do understand. I have thought it all out over and over, and I am convinced the need to tell is greater than the need to keep quiet."

"That is not the point. The whole question lies in the fact that information received in confidence through an official position cannot under any circumstances be made use of by the confidant. If it had been heard differently, or if I were not an official, it would not be quite the same. As it is, you cannot possibly make use of it."

"I must make use of it. No—listen! . . . " as he opened his mouth to remonstrate more forcibly. "It is only the report that you heard of in confidence. The facts were known to you before. They were known to most people up here. Therefore, if I chose to tell the facts, no one could very well blame me. . . ."

"Except that they could be received as idle gossip only."

"Exactly. That is the whole situation. Sup-

pose I tell Evelyn that such and such a thing is rumoured, she is naturally so trusting and unsuspicious, that she would merely put it aside as spiteful gossip. If I am to gain anything at all by repeating what you told me, it will only be by divulging the fact of that report."

"Then you must leave the whole thing alone."

"No, that is what I cannot do. I have thought, and thought, and thought, and I am only quite certain about one thing—she has a right to know."

"Not at any cost."

"I am not sure about that. Certainly at the cost of my telling about the report."

The man wrinkled his forehead and looked thoroughly perplexed. It was difficult for him to withstand Gwendolen at any time; indeed, it was rarely any use attempting to; now he felt only keenly conscious that she had no right to speak. Yet he had found her rarely, if ever, in the wrong, and his confidence in her judgment was as great as his humble adoration of herself. And this was no mere form of words; neither was it the outcome of a *laissez-faire* spirit: it was the verdict of a man who understood.

Wynyard Leven's boyishness of appearance was due solely to a youthful, gladsome, generous soul, a clean-shaven upper lip, a perfect Grecian profile, and an extraordinarily winsome smile. At heart he was thoughtful almost beyond his years; and at a certain time of perpetual stress and worry, when Gwendolen was dependent upon him alone for whatever rest and comfort she could find, he had never once failed her. He never would fail her. She knew it as well as a woman may know

anything in these days of fickle, transitory affections. And it was that knowledge in a large measure, as well as a deep and growing nausea for the ways of the gay social world, and the hollow mockery of her own life, with its outward brilliance and inward hidden canker, that made her take her courage in her hands, and throw everything aside, to face exile in a distant land with him. Exactly how much of success and how much of failure there had been in the step she was not one ever to tell; but beyond doubt the success had been largely due to her courage. The woman who is not afraid may achieve most things. In the long run, she comes out higher than the timid, vacillating woman who could only go this way and that, as Society dictates. But the courage must stand good always, and it must have calm reasoning behind it. To have the courage to take a plunge, and then to cavil and cry out because the results are not to our liking, is almost worse than no courage at all. Gwendolen was built in the stronger mould. She had taken her plunge and she had accepted the good and ill together of the result, but which, if either, predominated she would not say; and equally certainly she would not allow herself to be undone by remorse or regret.

Because he had seen all this in her words and actions ever since he first came into her life, Wynyard knew that her judgment was to be trusted, and she would do no decisive thing without thoroughly weighing it.

And the knowledge left him only the worse perplexed and worried now, for from the bottom of his soul he abhorred the idea of violating a con-

fidence under any circumstances whatever. Meanwhile Gwendolen only went on with her flower moving gracefully about the room to place them while she talked.

"You know, of course," he ventured, "that a third person interfering in a love affair rarely gets any thanks, and is usually unjustly blamed."

"Yes, I know: but in a case like this, that would seem to me a paltry excuse to fail a woman in an exceptional position. It is this exceptionalness that makes me wish to violate your confidence. If we were in England, and she were among her friends, there might be other ways and means. Or, again, if she were very much in love with Su Henry, it would be different. One might feel it was worth while leaving well alone. But here she is, far away from all her own friends, bent on fulfilling a promise from a quixotic notion of obligation. And you and I know the man has no just claim to any such generosity. I have tried other arguments, and they have failed. She says it is all supposition. Therefore, if she is to be staved in time, I must tell her something tangible."

"And do you think she will like to be stayed?"

"I feel convinced that she does not love him. When she became engaged to him, she knew very little about men at all, and she was perhaps to a certain extent dazzled. If he were to ask her now, I believe she would refuse him; but she is too loyal to go back on her word, and I cannot make her see that it is a mistaken loyalty."

Wynyard stood with his hands in his pockets, looking out across the wide reaches of veldt and bush, still troubled and perplexed.

Gwendolen continued : " I have thought about it from every aspect, and I am finally persuaded that her right to know is stronger than any other right. There must often come a parting of the ways, when it seems as if two rights are opposed to each other. The most one can do then is to decide which is the stronger. If we guard this secret, as I admit it ought to be guarded under ordinary circumstances, as a point of honour, Evelyn will marry Sir Henry in ignorance of something that might otherwise have stayed her. You know I have very strong views on the subject. Perhaps a man cannot quite see things from the woman's standpoint. For me it is different, and because she is what she is, I feel that she ought to know. With a woman marrying for position, or a home, or any worldly motive, it might be otherwise. The very simplicity of her thoughts and motives gives her the strongest possible right and claim to be told."

Still he was silent. As a man, he had but one view. He could see nothing but the dishonour of an official secret wilfully betrayed. Gwendolen understood, but she continued to press her point :

" In a wider sense, there is yet a further right." She left her flowers a moment, and came and stood beside him. " Wyn, you know perfectly well that this thing of which he is accused is a menace to the future well-being of a country. What has been the result in the States of America, and what are they doing now to try and stamp out the evil? How much better would it have been to have restrained it in the beginning? That is where the pioneer civilizers failed. Those who come first to a new land must ever have a responsibility to those

who come after. They are under an obligation to try and start things in the right direction. For anyone in Sir Henry Mahon's position not only to set an example in following this evil, but to be actually reported for excess, is betrayal of a trust far more widespread and significant than any possible question of betrayal in exposing him. If afterwards, Evelyn liked to overlook it and fulfil her promise, that is nothing to do with anyone but herself. But, on the other hand, if, as you and I know is almost certain to be the case, she sets her face firmly against it and takes back her promise her action may result in an incalculable amount of good. For everyone out here will guess the true reason why she failed him at the eleventh hour. Nothing will be said. Nothing will need to be said. It will be known by instinct that this sort of thing is revolting beyond words to a pure-minded girl, and that, somehow, knowledge reached her in time. Because of his high position, it will be all the more widely known and commented upon and that is all the better for the country. She strikes a blow, right away, at an evil that is on the increase, and Rhodesia will be indebted to her. For every man who is doing what Sir Henry Mahon has been reported for will have it brought home to him more forcibly than ever before what the best women of his own country think of him, and how much cause he has in their eyes to be ashamed. I feel more strongly about it than you, perhaps, can. Wyn; partly because the mere idea outrages the white woman, and partly because I have learnt to love this far-off, beautiful country, and I see in it a grave evil menacing her future. Perhaps, too, the

surest salvation will come through the women. If we set our faces definitely against it and make no secret of our disgust, it is, at any rate, a move in the right direction, and a trust fulfilled to the best of our endeavour for those who come after."

He was taller than she, and suddenly he turned to her, and stooped and kissed her hair; and veiled in his eyes, mingling with their fondness, was a look of proud exultation.

Then suddenly his lips curled somewhat. "And you are the woman whom the good people at home condemn to ignominy and disgrace, because you dared to live with a man you loved, rather than suffer the indignity of continuing to live with a faithless, licentious beast."

She smiled, but there was neither regret nor bitterness in the smile.

"You will judge by the individual. We are not that so foolish of you. Society must set its face against divorce at present, for the welfare of the multitude; but by and by, when women are braver and stronger and more dependable, there will dawn a day of wider and deeper significance. There is always a violent oscillation each way before the happy mean is reached, and it seems to me that the passionate revolt of to-day is the outcome of the cramped narrowness and bigotry of half a century ago. Presently things will simmer down to a workable level that will reveal itself, and we shall have a generous equality of the sexes that will raise the tone of both. It will be the man and woman on trust, against the man and woman violently breaking unendurable fetters, or rendering them endurable through double dealing

"I accept. In the meantime, may I trust fall to making a path for these to follow. If I am but the merest beginning of the path I am still nearly fortunate, because I have not had to make my stand unaided and alone."

He gathered her to him, and kissed her again and again.

"If she marries him because I would not speak, it will be martyrdom for her, Wyn," she breathed. "You . . . you . . . who saw so much in these old days of what a woman can be made to suffer . . . would not condemn any other woman . . . for the sake of . . . silence. I need not necessarily have consulted you, but somehow, I wanted to. If you cannot approve, at least say that you leave me free."

He was silent, and she urged her point.

"For the sake of the future, Wyn—and for the good of the country—let us give her the chance to strike this blow."

He disengaged himself, and drew up his figure with a new look of resolve and gravity.

"Darling, you have made me see that it may be very much a woman's question, apart altogether from a man's. As you say, her right to know is, perhaps, stronger than mine to conceal. As far as I am concerned, I leave you free."

XXIII

GWENDOLEN'S VICTORY

THE next day a telegram from Broken Hill, sent on ahead by a native runner, informed Evelyn that Sir Henry Mahon hoped to reach Broken Hill in a few days, and catch the weekly train to Livingstone, thereby joining her in about ten days.

Evelyn received the message without any outward sign, merely handing it gravely to the Administrator.

"He will probably have to wait three days at Broken Hill," was his comment, "as the train does not leave until Wednesday. I suppose Leven will see about the caboose going up for him."

"There is a message for you also," put in the Hippo, coming forward with a second telegram.

That was Thursday, and the mail went on Saturday.

Sitting quietly, a little aside, Gwendolen took a mental note of the fact that she had not a day to lose. Instead of the caboose the following Saturday, if Evelyn acted as she anticipated, the final letter must go, and Sir Henry must turn back. For many reasons it was better that he should not journey further, if there was no longer the same reason to come south.

It proved to be one of the cold, blustery afternoons that occasionally, in June and July, drove them off the veranda to sit in the house, and Gwendolen suggested she and Evelyn should have a cosy tea together in her sitting room. Evelyn agreed readily. She had reached a stage when she did not like to be alone. Their invalid was now at the hospital, being nursed back to health, and she and Gwendolen were a good deal dependent upon each other for companionship. To-day she was wondering if she could ask Gwendolen to arrange a last meeting between herself and Ranger Metcalfe: struggling fitfully between her longing to see him and her feeling that it would be easier to go if she did not: struggling also between her fear that he had stayed away so rigidly because she had ceased to interest him when the journey was over and he was back on his beloved ranch, and her hope that it was because he, too, felt it the wiser course. The knowledge that Gwendolen had seen him that one afternoon, and made no allusion to it, further puzzled her; and at times she again wished to be once again on her journey: placed by the irremediable step beyond this torment of uncertainty.

Then suddenly and unexpectedly came the hour that was to change everything. Long afterwards Evelyn remembered gratefully the manner in which Gwendolen had made known to her the disagreeable truth. Just the quiet, calm, delicate way in which she had managed to spare her feelings, without leaving her in any doubt of all that was intended. She almost wondered if anyone else could have

done it so, and her admiration for her new friend widened and deepened.

She was busily engaged darning towels, of all things; and Evelyn smiled, as she had done before, at the spectacle of this elegant woman, in her dainty dress, giving her mind apparently to so homely an occupation. She realized how truly typical of her it was; for it so often happened that Gwendolen was occupied with something which was the last thing one would have expected of her.

Neither of them could have quite said afterwards how the subject was introduced, but there quickly came a moment when the red blood mounted slowly up Evelyn's neck and cheeks, until, in a spasm of disgust, she hid her face in her hands.

For some moments silence followed, during which Gwendolen went quietly on with her work, while the information and all it meant had time to sink thoroughly into the girl's mind. She had no intention whatever of using any personal influence in biasing her reception of it. Just to make known to her a certain fact was all her part. The rest she could only leave to the girl's own feelings.

At last Evelyn spoke without looking up.

"Will you please tell me everything," she said quietly. "I want to know the very worst."

"There is not much else to tell. For some time Sir Henry Mahon has been especially addicted to this form of vice, and has kept a certain establishment always at hand, known as his 'black harem.' No one took much notice, because this sort of thing is very general in some parts of Africa; though, of course, his position of responsibility

made excess in him even worse than in others. Recently, however, as I have said, he overstepped all bounds, and a report, exposing him, was sent to headquarters."

"What do you mean by 'recently'?" Evelyn asked, striving to speak calmly and hide the shrinking in her voice.

Without looking up, Gwendolen replied in a low, clear voice, "I mean that the report went to England after his engagement."

"After! . . ." No words could describe the sudden, swift horror and smouldering wrath ringing in the single word, as the sense of the personal insult came home to her.

She stood up, as if she could no longer bear it calmly, and steadying her voice with an effort, added:

"Does anyone know what he replied to the charge?"

Gwendolen raised her head, and their eyes met.

She had not, as a matter of fact, intended to reveal how Sir Henry Mahon had cleared himself. But as she met Evelyn's gaze now, she knew she had no longer any choice—so insistently compelling were the steadfast eyes, that demanded to be told.

"Yes, I know," she said, quite simply. "He sheltered himself behind you."

For one moment Evelyn seemed staggered. She looked as if she had been struck. Then higher and higher rose the angry colour, and the blue of her eyes grew steely and hard.

"He . . . he . . . dared to do that," she muttered between her teeth. "He could stoop

. . . but no—it was scarcely stooping, he was so low already.”

Then it was as though a flood of horror flowed over her, swamping her anger, swamping her spirit. “I can’t endure it,” she breathed, a little pitifully. “What shall I do, Gwendolen? . . . It is all so horrible to me. I think if I had loved him deeply, it would have killed me. As it is, it only makes me feel I would rather die than have to face him. Do . . . do . . . other women feel like this, and perhaps find out . . . too late?”

“Perhaps,” in the same quiet voice. “But a great many women have to overlook it. They often have very little choice. Some do not even mind. It hits you harder than many because . . . well, because of everything. You are naturally so ideal, and direct, and unsophisticated. It would be better for the country if it hit more as it hits you.”

“I don’t know how anyone can ‘not mind,’” with a shrinking movement. “To me it is sickening, horrible! . . .”

“That is as it should be; but I think, perhaps, it is not fair to judge other women in the matter at all. There are sure to be so many contingencies of which we know nothing, and circumstances alter most cases. We may take it for granted beyond doubt, that every woman in her heart of hearts loathes this thing intolerably; even if circumstances compel her to overlook it. What we want badly is to bring home forcibly to the men what the sort of women they like best honestly think of it.”

Evelyn was roaming restlessly about the room,

with the shrinking disgust still in her face. Suddenly, she stopped and looked at Gwendolen.

"What am I to do?" she said.

"What do you want to do?"

There was a second's pause, then she replied with quiet resolve—"I shall break off my engagement, and I should like to go home by the next mail-boat."

"And what about Sir Henry?"

"Need I see him? . . ." shrinkingly. "I would so much rather not."

"I don't think you need feel that you owe him much consideration, if that is what you mean. He . . . my dear child . . . if you knew anything at all about men, there would be no need for me to tell you, he is utterly unworthy of you in more ways than one."

"It is what you tried to tell me the other day?"

"Yes."

A pause followed.

"No, I don't think I owe him anything," at last. "I . . ." she blushed painfully . . . "when he first made love to me, I often told him of many of my hopes and dreams . . ." she continued, as if it hurt her to speak. "He . . . he . . . sympathized with them all. He said he had ideals too. He talked of them, and it seemed that he had so many noble thoughts. He made me feel that it rested with me to help him to realize them. That is why I would not let myself listen when I heard ill of him. On the ship . . . there was someone . . . I overheard . . . they said he was the most hated man in Egypt, and an unmitigated cad. I told myself

they were enemies who were jealous of me. . . . I put the memory aside. But now . . . I have done, Gwendolen," with a swift look at her and appeal, "was it . . . true?"

Gwendolen came forward and took both his hands in hers. "Yes, dear . . . I'm glad it was. . . . Thank God, you know it now."

There was an aching pause, then Evelyn asked with a new note of pain—"Then why did not Mr. Metcalfe tell me so? . . . He was my friend. . . . we were special friends. . . . He said nothing. He left me to go on, and now he wreck my life. Why did he do that? . . . Is he a false friend also?"

"Can't you guess the chief reason why?" asked a sudden vibration in her soft voice. "Why? Why had he to spoil another man's chances because he wanted you for himself? The very fact that he wanted you made him helpless. It seems to me for one or two reasons, that he was bound to step aside."

"How do you know? . . ." It was in Ted's voice now that the low vibration swelled, and swelled, and shook. "Tell me . . ." in an imperious tone. . . . "How do you know this?" she broke off with a little sad note. "When I go away, I want to go with my faith unshaken at least in him."

"You certainly can. I know it because he told me himself; and because it is through him I have brought myself to tell you the truth."

"Through him? . . ." bewilderedly. . . . "Through him? . . ."

"Yes. After he had been back a week, he

began to see the matter a little differently. He knew that you were very much in ignorance about various things; and it came to him that you ought to know—that you had a right to be told. It was impossible for him to come forward and tell you himself, so he appealed to me. It was entirely because of his appeal I have done what I have."

"Ah! . . ." the clear blue eyes were lowered to the carpet now. It was almost as if she were afraid to let the light in them be seen. For the moment only one thought filled her brain. Never for one moment had he failed her. All through the dreary, unbroken silence he had thought of her. For her sake he had approached Gwendolen Leven and freely admitted his secret. For her sake—she knew it well enough now—he had stayed away.

For the time it seemed enough. She could be brave now. She could face anything. She lost every shred of fear concerning what Sir Henry Mahon might do and say. She could even go away without seeing him, bathed and renewed and content in the knowledge that he had proved all she believed him, and justified to the fullest measure her faith.

Could her eyes do other than glow. The very joy in her heart seemed ready to suffocate her as she stood silently—silently—

Gwendolen awoke her with a question: "You surely knew that Mr. Metcalfe cared for you?"

"I thought so the last evening of our journey, but since we arrived it has all been different. He told me once that he could not possibly marry while he lived out here, and he could not afford to give it up; and so I concluded that he had only a

friendly liking for me, and when he got back to his ranch, it had passed out of his thoughts."

Gwendolen smiled, with a soft light almost of amusement in her eyes.

"You have so little knowledge of men," she said, "or you would have known that that strong, silent, resolute type does not lightly love nor easily forget."

Evelyn smiled too, but with the sadness still lingering.

"I was afraid to know. If I had let myself know it then, I might not have been able to keep my word. Now I can go back glad in the memory of it, and with all the hurt of General Mahon's falseness wiped out by Ranger Metcalfe's truth and sincerity."

"And is it to end there?" Gwendolen could not help asking.

"It must. I see now why he told me so much about himself. I can only respect his confidence, and the motives, and pass out of his life, if his silence shows me it is still his wish."

Gwendolen felt it was useless to say anything further then, and led the conversation back to the original theme.

Later, with her help, Evelyn concocted, after many attempts, the difficult letter which was to turn General Mahon back from Broken Hill. By Gwendolen's advice she was perfectly honest, avoiding subterfuge, and telling him as delicately and yet as plainly as she could why she took back her promise at the last moment, and wished it to be the end of everything. Finally she told him it was her intention to return to England at once,

and to merely announce that they had agreed to break off the engagement, allowing time for him to reply to her letter so that it might be seen the wish was mutual.

Gwendolen then involved the Administrator in her enthralling help, looking over the difficult interval, and arranging her departure as quickly and naturally as possible.

XXIV

GWENDOLEN'S PHILOSOPHY

DURING the next few days, the kindness of everyone touched Evelyn deeply. It was impossible for her not to see that there was almost an air of relief in all their intercourse with her. Beyond doubt, congratulations on her change of plans would have been more sincere than any on her approaching marriage had been; for she had won every heart, and made many friends who would never forget her.

Only Gwendolen still remained grave. Her note to Metcalfe, informing him of her action and the

result, had merely brought in reply a letter of thanks, direct and sincere as himself, but containing no allusion to his own personal feelings, and no suggestion of a meeting.

Was it possible, she asked, that he meant to let Evelyn go back to England, and not even see her first? By the tone of his letter she was afraid that it was, and while she admired greatly his strength of purpose, she felt inconsistently vexed that he should persist in the line he had taken, and perhaps throw away his own and Evelyn's chance of happiness. For, knowing and feeling equally all that he knew and felt about the unsuitability of a lonely ranch as a home for a delicately nurtured Englishwoman, she yet knew that when the love was of the right quality, all things could bend to and be dominated by it, and a true and deep happiness be won through mutual help. And from the bottom of her heart she believed that the love between Evelyn Harcourt and the Silent Rancher, once consummated, would stand every test and shine gloriously.

But how bring them together?

He, with his steadfast fixity of purpose, insiscently remaining in the background. She, with her ideal spirit of sacrifice and surrender to his wish, unprepared to take any initiative whatever.

She felt only sure of one thing. A meeting must be arranged somehow, and then she must trust to consequences. Feeling his will might be too strong for her, she decided to rely on Evelyn herself, knowing in her heart how greatly she desired a last interview.

It was in the restless, feverish days that had to

hapse before a reply came from General Mahon that she broached the subject.

She and Evelyn were sitting on the verandah together as usual, making a pretence of reading, but the elder woman easily saw that the younger was only lost in thought, with a far-away expression in her eyes. She roused her suddenly with the question, "Would you like to see Mr. Metcalfe's ranch before you go home?"

A flush crept over Evelyn's face, and as she hesitated before replying, Gwendolen continued—"Wyn could drive us out to-morrow if you like. We could get there about lunch-time, and spend the afternoon. It is a lovely spot. I should like you to see it."

Still Evelyn remained tongue-tied and serious, so Gwendolen took the matter in her own hands. "As a matter of fact, it is already arranged, though, of course, you need not go unless you like. I sent Mr. Metcalfe a message this morning, saying Wyn and I would come, and that probably you would accompany us."

"Did he . . . did he . . . invite us?"

"No, but that is nothing. He never does. Wyn and I have always gone just when we felt inclined, and Mr. Cardington could spare the mules. It probably would never enter his head we should expect to be asked."

Evelyn bent her head. At the mere thought her heart was beating wildly, and the sudden hope was almost too much for her, for she had daily and hourly been trying to school herself into going away without seeing him, because apparently it was his wish. Not knowing what to say, she took

refuge in silence, and the outing thus fell into shape of itself. Gwendolen, realizing this, changed the subject, not willing to give her a chance to raise objections.

They spoke of Elaine McNair, who, it was now arranged, should travel to England with Evelyn and remain in her care for a time. She was still scarcely well enough to travel, but the doctor was anxious to get her away from Livingstone as quickly as possible, among faces and scenes that would help her to forget. Later on, it was tacitly understood, Berridge would get an exchange to another part of the country and go home to fetch her.

Gwendolen spoke of his long and silent affection, and of how, when he was on the verge of disgrace through his besetting failing, his splendid daring in saving her life had not only helped him to prove what sterling qualities he possessed in spite of his weakness, but had made a steadier man of him altogether.

"It was his chance," she said. "and Life was good in giving it to him. It is a little unnerving to realize how much must often depend upon being given one's chance; and still further, upon having the pluck to take it when it comes.

"Beyond doubt, many heroes have died unknown and unproved, simply because they never had their chance; while others, to whom it came, lacked the perspicacity to see it, or the grit to seize it.

"Life is so much a question of opportunities. It has to be. Probably that is the surest way to find the best mettle, in continuing the survival of the fittest. For the man who cannot seize his oppor-

tunity when it comes undoubtedly lacks something in a way that would unfit him for a high place amongst the 'fittest.'

"And, after all, it is chiefly a question of nerve, and insight, and readiness. Opportunities do not announce their coming. The main point really is to be on the look-out, and snatch them when they come."

She was silent a few moments, and Evelyn watched her intently, waiting for more.

"You are not bored with my philosophy, I hope!" and Gwendolen looked up with a smile. "I'm afraid I'm getting rather prosy out here in the wilderness; but the odd thing about the wilderness is that one has time to get a grip upon many essential things in life which one ignores in the hurry of cities."

"I love your philosophy, as you call it," and Evelyn smiled a response. "Please go on."

"I was only going to say that happiness is much the same as opportunity. It very often has to be snatched. A little pluck, a little daring, a little trusting, and opportunity and happiness may be both won together; where diffidence, and false pride, and a lack of understanding, might lose both forever." She got up, as if to give a disarming touch of impersonal lightness to her words, and moved forward to attend to one of her beloved plants, which was getting too much sun. "There is a nice little maxim for you," she finished. "Most of the best things in life do not come merely for the asking. They either have to be wooed and won by long and unwearying endeavour, or else—*snatched*. In a fertile and delightful book I

have in my mind, to be called 'The Phil' of Gwendolen Leven,' I think the first sentence will be—'The great art of life is to catch the snatch an opportunity when it comes.' By the chance of which I shall now snatch the first opportunity he passes and insist upon his moving his poor begonia into the shade.

"I'm afraid I don't mind His Honor the Administrator, nor anyone else just now," as the Hippo approached, and commenced a remonstrance concerning haste. "At the present moment so happen to be more my opportunity than his secretary, therefore, to be consistent to myself, I am logically bound to snatch you. In consequence, O Hippo! please to move that poor begonia to plant into the shade; and Evelyn will appear another time."

The Hippo looked at Evelyn with a native air of anxiety, and touched his forehead significantly.

"Don't look so alarmed," she said, smiling. "I'm sure it is much easier to be the opportunity than the snatcher."

XXV

IN WHICH OPPORTUNITY BECKONS TO EVELYN

It would have been almost impossible even for Evelyn herself to describe her feelings next day, when she and Gwendolen and Wynyard started off with a team of six mules to drive to Ranger Metcalfe's cattle ranch. She was chiefly conscious of a heart that seemed to beat in leaps and bounds one moment, and stop altogether the next.

Sometimes she tried to think what she would say, and how she would act, without, however, achieving any definite result. Then she tried to imagine how he would look. The only thing she dare not remember was her broken engagement and the reason of it. If she had let herself think of that, she felt she would never have had the nerve to come.

Then they drove in sight of the little rustic house, with its thatched roof and home made verandah, looking very pretty and inviting, on the top of a small kopje, surrounded by a wilderness of gay flowers. At the foot of the kopje a tall figure in riding-breeches and sun-helmet told them their host was awaiting them.

For one moment Evelyn felt faint, then she pulled herself together pluckily. When Metcalfe stood below her, holding out his hands to help her

down she was able to smile frankly back into the eyes that strove in vain to hide their superabundant gladness. Almost in the same minute, everything that had passed since they parted seemed brushed aside, and there was just their old happy comradeship and ease.

He led the way to the house with Gwendolen, and she and Wynyard followed together: but already the restless, uneven beating of her heart had hushed itself into a new sense of calm, born of the veiled story in those quiet eyes, that all its strength and persistency could not hide.

On the verandah she stood quietly beside Wynyard and looked out over the wide-spreading veldt where some of his beloved cattle were grazing—looked at the kraals, and the cattle boys' huts, looked at the spaces of cultivated ground, bravely chequering the limitless veldt, which tried so hard to overcome them and take back its own; looked at the rich line of foliage, where the river threaded its joyous, thrice-blessed way; looked lastly to the far blue hills, from whence, it would seem, came the dreams which just once in a lifetime come to her. And while she gazed, it was as though the spirit of the land began to storm the citadel of her mind and heart. Across the wide spaces voices whispered to her the strong, fearless, untrammelled might of the young, primitive lands; where a man is great for his manliness, before all things, and a woman for her free, unfettered courage and the strong womanliness of the early mothers of a great race. What were the conventions of a pampered luxurious city, they asked, to this freshness of a young world, where the winds of heaven chased

each other across miles of untrod den solitudes. What could the luxuries of the city offer to compare with this sense of self-dependent richness and fulfilling in a new country, ready to work out its destiny for itself in its own strong way, profiting by the experience of the old countries, but in no way prepared to be subservient to them in bondage of mind? Evelyn could not have put into words what the mysterious voices whispered to her, but they filled her sense nevertheless: calling insistently to her soul that she might be ready to understand when the crucial moment came.

But at present, of all that was so enthrallingly interesting, the one thing she dare not yet quite trust herself to look at was the Silent Rancher himself. She knew just how he appeared, with his broad shoulders and splendid proportions, the fine, shapely head, the grey, steadfast eyes, the winsome, whimsical, mocking smile, and the lurking twinkle that had such an enchanting way of beliving the seriousness of those same grey eyes.

But she dare not look at him yet. Her own eyes might tell too much. In the meantime, she was glad of Wynyard Loven's sympathetic silence and Gwendolen's attractive gaiety, as she helped Metcalfe put a few finishing touches to his luncheon-table, set in an open-air dining-room commanding a lovely view of the country.

Then they all sat down to a gay lunch, when Gwendolen excelled herself as a conversationalist, and never gave a chance for an awkward moment of consciousness. She made Metcalfe talk as Evelyn had only heard him once before, and all she and Wynyard had to do was to listen and

laugh appreciatively. And yet, throughout the meal, she was conscious of Ranger Metcalfe's feelings to herself. They proclaimed themselves in the way he performed the smallest of his attentions as host. They squeezed themselves edgewise into his voice, however prosaically he tried to address her. They flaunted themselves unmanageably in his eyes, in spite of their grave deference whenever he looked full into hers. Yet by neither act nor word did he assume any special friendship between them, nor allow his manner to suggest there might soon be. In the midst of her inward sense of joy, she felt a sudden cold numbness as she realized how strong he was, and would ever be in carrying out a set purpose.

When lunch was over, they went into the little two-roomed house to look at some of his horns and trophies of sport, and then suddenly Gwendolen announced her intention of going with her husband to see some of the cattle.

"I don't want you," she told Metcalfe lightly, "because you will talk 'shop' all the time and spoil everything. You will discourse on all their points, and tell me their breed, and their value, and their killing-weight, and it doesn't interest me in the least. I much prefer to pet them and enjoy them independent of their ancestors. You must entertain Evelyn for a change. I'm sure she will be very interested to know whether your pet stock was bred from a Rhodesian, or an African, or a Devon shorthorn, or a polled Angus. Come along, Wyn. We'll go and get lucerne to curry favour with them."

Two minutes later Evelyn and the Silent

Rancher were alone in his little home. She stood by the table, where she had been turning over the leaves of a photograph book; he, after a few strained, hesitating moments moved to the window, and stood with his back to her, watching the others depart. At least, his attitude suggested intentionally that he was watching them, but in reality, as Evelyn quickly discovered, he was looking hard at the far away hills without seeing anything, clenching his hands and his teeth in a spasm of resolve.

Thus, for some minutes, they remained, and no sound broke the stillness.

Yet in their hearts was neither stillness nor calm. In the one was a soundless, passionate battle between inclination and resolution.

In the other, came without word or warning, swiftly, overpoweringly, the great moment of awakening.

It came as she looked round the little sitting room, noting tenderly all the trifling, homely details of his daily life—his pipes, his slippers, his papers, his bachelor attempts at makeshift home comforts. The mother-woman in her smiled tenderly over those makeshift home comforts; because she loved him truly that mother-woman tingled to have her hands and head busy making them the real thing. For the joy of the woman who loves with the great love is service.

Her gaze roamed on, until the awakening widened with a sudden, irresistible force, which drove the tell-tale blood into her cheeks, as her eyes rested upon the doorless opening which led into the other little room. From where she stood

she could see the bare floor, strewn with two mats; the incongruous mass of hats, boots, and guns, and ammunition, and trunks and cases which characterize every Indian dwelling; the winds, relieved here and there by the voice of someone at home to add the homely touch.

Silently, motionlessly, non-committedly, at first, her clear eyes took in each detail, with a message of existence—the true heart of the revelation of what love and life most truly are to the true woman, came into her soul, and it was as an annunciation.

The faint colour in her cheeks grew to a flush; the light in her eyes glowed with a new light and a glory, as deeper and deeper grew the understanding of what Life held for her and for which it was willing to give.

With a new questioning her glance turned to the window, and out into the open air, and the voices of that youthful, laughing, untroubled life.

And at that moment the voices cried order, order, ever, calling—calling to her to heed and to stand. "In this young country the best is the strong," they cried. "Here there are no slow and fast lines, robbing young souls of their right of freedom and rich fulfilment, rather to let them clash with a conventionalty and prejudice; dwarfing the mind that is strong and blindly to emancipate itself. Here you are not near the beginning, when Truth and Strength and Courage came first; and if the human obeyed his best and highest instincts, apart from all forms, he was, by reason of his endeavour, not far from the Kingdom of Heaven." You believe that this

man loves you, and is debarred by certain reasons, that seem to him impassable, from telling you so. Then—since you have no fear of a wilderness life if he is there, take your courage in both hands, and—go to him.”

In a flash, as of sunrise glory, she understood.

With one last, tender look round the little bare rooms, she turned her head to the broad back and shapely head of the man in the window. And she knew without any telling that in that motionless form a fierce battle was raging to be true to what he believed to be the best for her.

She went up to him, standing a little behind, where she could see his face without having to meet his eyes.

“Ranger,” she said, in a low, clear voice. “Are you still determined never to ask a woman to share your life out here, however much you care for her?”

“How can I ask her?” The voice was the old rough, hungry one, that had torn at her heart that last evening of their journey, and which revealed, far more than it hid, just all he was feeling. “Now you have seen it for yourself—the silence, the distance, this poor little two-roomed house, can you wonder that, having no more to offer, I am afraid to ask?”

She smiled softly, there in the background, close beside his shoulder. She smiled because his voice was rough and unpolished—so rough that it told her all she wanted to know.

“And supposing a woman, the woman you love, asked you to give her the *privilege* of sharing it; because life with you, even here, seemed better

than life anywhere else without you? . . .” She paused, beginning to tremble a little at the sight of the forces warring in him. Then she finished unsteadily, and the catch in her voice broke down his last resolve—“Gwendolen says one of the chief arts in life is to be able to snatch opportunity when it comes—because I love you—Ranger—snatch me.”

There was a sound in the room that was half a groan of longing and half a cry of triumph, as he crushed her in his arms.

FINIS

No one but his private secretary ever knew to the full how General Mahon took his letter of dismissal. It found him encamped at Broken Hill, awaiting the weekly train to Livingstone and busily engaged making himself a little more disliked than usual, by his own special method of treating officials who did not happen to be administrators. His secretary had so long been a peacemaker, that for him it merely meant a little extra work for the time being, until the letter arrived. After that even he was nonplussed. Much practice had made him an adept at closing his ears

when it was advisable; at hearing well-earned approval when it was not spoken; and at judiciously re-wording peremptory letters, even in the process of being dictated. General Mahon owed more to that secretary than he was ever likely to know, or to admit if discovered; but it was not surprising that in the moment of all others even he had to fail him. When the letter had been received and read, all Captain Waring was able to gather was that some blow of exceptional severity had been aimed at his chief, and that it had *hit home*.

Later he understood that the engagement was broken off, for some reason General Mahon did not think fit to tell him, but against which he apparently had no defence.

"Then you will not go to Livingstone?" he asked, feeling somewhat puzzled.

"Certainly not," was the furious reply, "and I wish the damned place, and the damned country it's in, and all the damned continent were at the bottom of the sea."

The secretary was equally good at judiciously retiring, and he now backed out of the tent until the first fury had spent itself a little.

Later on, as he half expected, in a mood of irritable despondency his chief condescended to consult him concerning his next move, after indulging in a few bitter sneers against women and scandal mongers, and giving him to understand that the engagement was broken absolutely beyond repair.

Captain Waring was wise enough to seek no further information, and also to perceive that an immediate return to Fort Jameson would be un-

advisable. He accordingly mapped out a plan of travel that would take Sir Henry into the furthest corners of the country under his administration, thereby considerably increasing his knowledge of it, and also occupy three months, in which the startling finale to the engagement could be pretty well talked out before they returned to Government House. Sir Henry fell in with his suggestion at once, and in an incredibly short time Broken Hill drew a deep breath of relief, because its honoured guest had taken himself off in a hurry, with all his retinue.

The truth was left to guesswork, and, as Gwendolen had surmised, very few guesses were wide of the mark. Finally, there was considerable rejoicing among the women of the country, and among many of the men, and not a little admiration for the woman who had exchanged the highest place for one among the lowest, in the face of a disagreeable publicity.

There was the greatest rejoicing of all at Livingstone, where the Silent Rancher had ever been among its most popular and respected colonists, and where the prospect of Evelyn's continued residence was hailed with undisguised delight.

The return to England was curtailed to three months at Cape Town, in company with Elaine McNair, until the storm of surprised comment blew over; and the next time Ranger Metcalfe brought Evelyn the long railway journey from Cape Town to Livingstone, he brought her as his wife. Elaine went on to England alone, and was followed thither a year later by Arthur Berridge, to return with him to a new post in Southern

THE SILENT RANCHER

Rhodesian, especially procured for him by Mr. Cardington. Gwendolen saw them at Buluwayo on their way thither, and the pretty, happy-looking woman, with the ever-wonderful eyes, who stood in Elaine McNair's place made her almost gasp with surprise. A little later, in an aside to Ber-ridge, with her usual assumed lightness, she said—"I think perhaps there are a few guardian angels, after all. If so, the two in charge of your wife and Ranger Metcalfe's must be rather shaking hands with themselves just now."

She might have added a third, who had blessed the later life of Wynyard Leven's wife; but Gwendolen was one of those who never analyze and sift their happiness, for fear it melts away in the process.

On Metcalfe's beloved cattle ranch there was already a lusty young Rhodesian, who resembled his father in every way but one. This exception was doubtless owing to the reasoning of his precocious infant mind, which evolved the proposition that a Silent Rancher might be an interesting enough personality; but a Silent Baby was an anomaly that would have a precious poor time, and precious little fun, in the early years when a fellow who is any good has a right to assert himself with point and vigour. Accordingly, he not only raised his voice in various ways, sufficiently for the two, but kept his mother far too busy and interested and happy to remember anything except that he thrived gloriously on Rhodesian milk and Rhodesian air, and showed symptoms of developing into an administrator, at least, in the future. For the rest, her husband did not talk much more than

formerly, except in a language which she alone understood; but he never failed her in the great essentials, which are love, and truth, and thoughtfulness, and to the end of his life, be it duly observed—he passed her the salt with the right course.

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